This is Chapter 140-149 of the English Translation of the Japanese Web Novel *Arifureta Shokugyou de Sekai Saikyou.*

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Chapter 140 – Whispering Voice

Howa, Howa, Fuwa, Fuwa.

Surely, if there were sounds to describe the current situation, it ought to be those words. Among the seven great labyrinths, there was a labyrinth called the ice and snow cave. And inside that labyrinth was a gigantic maze in which there was a sealed door before which laid a tent. The mood inside the tent had become a pink space.

"… Hajime. Aaa…n."

"Nn. Aaa…n… Mmn. It's good. As expected, the best thing to eat while using a kotatsu is stew."

"Hajime-san, have some of mine too. Aaa…n."

"Aaa…n… Mmn. Anyway, Shia, your cooking skills are improving every day, you will make a great wife."

"Je-Jeez, Hajime-san! Such a thing! To say that I'm extremely cute, and on top of that, I would make a lovely wife from whom you wouldn't want to be away for even a moment! You're making me blush-!"

"Hajime, what about me?"

"Nn? Isn't that obvious? You will become the best wife in the world."

"Nn… I will also do my best to learn how to cook."

"Fufufu, Yue-san, let's study together and make Hajime's favorite dishes."

While "Aaa…n" feeding Hajime, Yue and Shia, who were sitting on both sides of Hajime, were having a conversation from which no one could imagine they were inside one of the world's great labyrinths.

There was stew on top of the kotatsu. That was seafood stew prepared by Shia, the smell of which tickled every nose in the vicinity. The ingredients had been acquired at the maritime town Erisen, frozen and stored inside the treasure warehouse.

Shia, with splendid knife-handling skills, had prepared the seafood along with various vegetables and seasoned the whole mix exquisitely. The sauce which looked like Ponzu (TL: citrus-based sauce, source

wiki) was also neatly done and truly wonderful. Because her housework was also perfect, Hajime's praise of Shia being a great wife was no overstatement.

Nevertheless, Shia was over interpreting. Hajime who had become tolerant towards Shia's attitude didn't particularly mind nor snap her out of it.

Then, as Yue was lightly tugging at his sleeve while asking 'Will I become a good wife?' with the expression of a lover, Hajime could of course not disagree, especially when she wore a gentle smile and displayed such a willingness to train hard to learn homemaking.

"Ne, Nee, Hajime-kun? What about me? Housework and cooking are also two of my strong points you know? I'll make plenty of delicious dishes for my husband and properly welcome him every day, you know?"

"Goshujin-sama, Mistress also thinks she will become a good wife, you know? As you know, Mistress is a 'devoted wife'. She guarantees she will make Goshujin-sama feel satisfied every day! Right? So, please also give this mistress some words of praise."

Hajime, Yue and Shia's pink space was interrupted by Kaori and Tio's impatience. Clinging to Hajime from behind, they were begging with a sweet tone for the same words he said to Yue and Shia.

"… Maa, since originally Kaori was always monopolizing the first place of the 'I want to date her' and 'I want to marry her' category rankings at school, isn't she already a charming wife?"

"Mouu! Not that. I'm not asking about the general opinion, but Hajime-san's!"

"… Kaori. Why are you hurting yourself?"

"Yu-Yue!? What do you mean!?"

"… You've already come to understand. You're still five, no, six years too soon."

"Concrete numbers, huh! Uu, the path might be rugged, but I won't lose!"

Yue answered in place of the evasive Hajime. With teary eyes, Kaori clenched her fists and renewed her determination. In truth, seeing how Kaori was not discouraged, Hajime's heart softened, but he kept it secret for now.

"Umm, Goshujin-sama?"

Tio, with tearful eyes, was pressing for an answer. Two splendid watermelons were heavily riding on Hajime's head, stroking him. She was obviously doing it on purpose.

"… You said 'As you know'. But let's see you state concretely the contents of the 'devotion' you speak of."

"Mu? Isn't that obvious? Of course, every day, be it morning, day or night, I will do 'this–' and 'that–' to Goshujin-sama, and then I will do 'that–' and 'this–' again. Then, Goshujin-sama will do "this–" to reward me right? That's why I will return the favor by doing "that–". Ah, I feel relieved. Doing "this–" and "that–" properly, then "that————" Abababababababababa-!?"

"… You worthless dragon. You will be the only one I leave behind in this world."

“Tio-san, restrain yourself a little…”

In response to Tio who was shamelessly continuing her indecent talk thoroughly, an ‘Abababa’ sound caused by Hajime’s ‘Lightning Clad’ interrupted Tio’s speech.

With a ‘PikuPiku’ sound, Tio kept convulsing without getting up. The lightning seemed really effective. Even Shia was stunned at the appearance of such a Tio.

However, since ‘I will leave you behind’ was meant as threatening words, it could be quite naturally assumed he was planning on taking her along as well.

The fact that Tio was standing close to Hajime was obviously the proof she was spontaneously asking Hajime’s permission to be by his side.

Kouki and the others were sitting on a kotatsu on the opposite side, silently pecking at their stew while trying their best to ignore the ongoing scene. However, barely able to put up with the irresponsible and irritating scene, their chopsticks were continuously shaking in frustration.

“Kouki… even though I thought I had gotten used to this kind of commotion…”

“Don’t talk about that, Ryuutaro, my mind can’t take it anymore…”

“Isn’t it a good thing? Objectively seeing how we used to be?”

“Used to be? Could it be you are actually angry at…? No, forget it.”

Kouki was glancing at Hajime and Kaori with an extremely complicated expression and speaking in a low voice with Ryuutaro whose face showed deep annoyance. Strangely, the usually sarcastic Shizuku remained quiet, roughly snatching fish from the stew. She would gaze at Hajime from time to time, obviously irritated. Suzu, who had brought up the topic, shrank back spontaneously each time she was remembered of the fuss.

And, at that moment, Hajime set down his chopsticks (which he was barely using because of being ‘Aaa…n’ed all the time) and took out a shiny gray metal plate from his pocket. It had an uneven sharp tip and a magic square engraved on it. It was a ‘gate key’ which connected space.

Hajime suddenly turned back and projected the key. It was connected to the cross bits he had sent looking for the key to open the sealed door that prevented them from proceeding further. At the center of the plate which had stuck into space, a gate opened. On the other side of the gate was a gem-like object emitting yellow light from a pedestal in a room surrounded by ice walls.

Furthermore, there was one more thing.

“GuruaAAAAAAA!!!”

From the other side of the gem, there was also the form of a five-meter tall furious-looking frost ogre approaching.

“Bufu!?” X4

Kouki and the others who were seated at the kotatsu and pecking at their stew all simultaneously spewed it out. At any rate, their meal was interrupted by a war cry and they were suddenly being

approached by an ogre clearly on a different level than the ogres they had confronted so far. It was pointless to tell them not to panic.

However, Hajime didn't particularly panic and extended his hand through the gate, picked up the yellow gem. In exchange, he simply extracted a metal ball about twice as big as a basketball from his treasure warehouse. A 'Bachi' sound resounded as he instantly poured electricity inside, after which he casually threw the ball through the gate as if throwing trash away.

Then, he immediately turned the key, closing the gate, and retrieving it.

Immediately thereafter,

ZudoOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!!!!!

From a distant place, the sound of a ridiculously powerful explosion reverberated as the air started vibrating.

Hajime sat down and picked up his chopsticks as if nothing had particularly happened. The gem clad in yellow light on top of the table was proof that this series of unbelievable events took place in their reality.

"… Hajime. Aaa~n."

"Hajime-san, Aaa~n desu."

And, as expected, Yue and Shia also resumed the 'Aaa~n' as if nothing had happened. Kouki and the others who had been dripping cold sweat snapped back to reality and simultaneously opened their mouths.

"No, no, no, no, there's definitely something not right, right!?!?" X4

"Nn?"

Hajime, whose mouth was being stuffed with fresh seafood by Kaori and Tio who entered the feeding competition, tilted his head as if to say 'what's wrong?'.

With an expression not hiding his irritation towards Hajime's behavior, Kouki inquired.

"Nagumo. What was that earlier?"

"Earlier you say… But you were looking, weren't you?"

"I was! But not that! I'm talking about what you did!"

"What I did… you ask strange things. It's just as you saw, right?"

Hajime gave Kouki a gaze questioning his sanity after Kouki raised his voice. Not having obtained the response he was seeking, Kouki looked ready to flip the table over in anger at any moment.

Shizuku came to the emotionally unstable Kouki while rubbing her forehead as if putting up with a headache and tried to explain the 'as you saw' part to Kouki.

“In short, Nagumo-kun found this yellow gem you can see with his cross bits, and retrieved it using ‘gate’. It’s likely that the moment the cross bits intruded the place where the gem used to be, some monster supposed to be its guardian or something reacted angrily, before being killed by the bomb Nagumo-kun tossed away through the gate…. or so I guess.”

“Ah. It’s completely as you say. Just like what you saw, right?”

“That’s what I’m saying! Isn’t there something wrong with this! You normally don’t just go around directly confronting a guardian keeping the dungeon’s treasure, defeating it, and retrieving the prize like that!”

Kouki was honestly saying something trivial.

“No, isn’t it better to collect them easily like this? It would be a bother to be busy chasing after each one of the four keys ourselves, right?”

“Th-That may be so. But if we don’t follow the rules, will our progress be acknowledged by the labyrinth…”

“Once or twice should be alright. We did take a considerable shortcut at the Great Volcano, and our capture was acknowledged with no problem after all. It should be fine if Yue’s group and Amanogawa’s group respectively defeat the guardians of the two remaining keys and retrieve them. I’ll map a route for you.”

“Uu… Is the difficulty alright? It’s the capture of a great labyrinth after all?”

“Kouki… Stop thinking too deeply about Nagumo. You don’t want stomach pain at that age.”

Kouki was holding his head between his hands. Ryuutaro patted his shoulders with an expression of sympathy.

“That’s right. Nagumo-kun is the walking embodiment of irrationality. There’s nothing to be surprised about.”

“Shizu, Shizu…… When Suzu thinks about Guardian-san, she becomes excessively sad for some reason. If another Guardian-san is dragged out by Nagumo-kun, I think things will definitely look bad. So let’s work hard to preserve our sanity?”

Ryuutaro approved the advice a sad-looking Suzu had given Shizuku as Suzu was gulping down fish and turned to her in turn.

“It seems it would also be difficult for me to have the ‘common sense’ I have conceived so far be damaged any further by Hajime. I have to agree with Suzu’s suggestion.”

Kouki and his group had satisfied their hunger and were pecking at the last remnants of their food when the sound of a second explosion reverberated through the great labyrinth.

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“I wonder if Shizuku-chan and the others are fine…”

Kaori’s worried voice echoed.

They were before the two sealed doors.

Three gems had already been put into the door's corresponding sockets. Of the three, aside from two gems Hajime had obtained effortlessly, the other had been brought by Yue's team, who had easily defeated the gem's guardian and seized its key, which was to be expected given their ability.

Only one key was remaining, the last gem. It was the gem Kouki's team headed to while being guided by one of Hajime's Cross bits. As a result of splitting into two groups, Kaori had grown anxious, wondering if Kouki's team would be able to defeat the last gem's guardian safely.

"Looks like there's no problem. They had a hard fight, but it looks like they managed to bring it down. They don't have any severe injuries. At some point, it did seem like Ryuutaro had frostbite but it was immediately healed."

"Thank god."

Kaori breathed a sigh of relief after hearing the information conveyed through the cross bits.

Hajime moved the cross bit standing before Kouki's team who were finished with their battle and had retrieved the last key. At the same time, using 'gate key', Hajime connected the space between their location and the cross bit. Space softly distorted, and the appearance of Kouki and the others who had a strangely refreshed expression could be seen on the other side.

"Somehow, you guys look happy…"

"Umu. They are most likely relieved to have been able to properly pass the maze's trial."

Shia was tilting her head pondering the reason for their happy faces when Tio answered her question with a seemingly pleasant expression. She was right on the mark.

Kouki, who was holding the gem in his hand, passed through the gate, went past Shia's group and headed towards the sealed doors. There, he inserted the gem into the last socket.

Immediately after, the thorny shrub on the door was covered in light. The gems started to shine brightly in all their splendor. Then, the gate's impressive doors began opening on their own.

At a glance, the passage starting from the entrance of the gate looked no different from the labyrinth's passages so far. If anything was different, it seemed to be the bright reflection of the ice walls. Hajime and the others' figures were vividly reflected.

"Well then, let's go."

Following Hajime's order, everyone simultaneously stepped through the door. The sight before them, sure enough, gave off the feeling of a mirror house. The ice acted just like mirrors. The bright light was reflected endlessly. Indeed, the ice walls on both sides of the passage acted like opposite mirrors, and Hajime's party was reflected a countless number of times.

Aside from the ceiling hidden by a spray of snow, it looked really like an endless corridor. The intense reflectivity of the ice made it clear it was no simple ice. If not for the chilling cold it radiated, it could maybe even be mistaken for a mirror.

A ‘Kotsu, Kotsu’ sound echoed along with the footsteps of Hajime’s party as they proceeded. Not only light, sounds also seemed to reverberate.

“… Somehow it feels like we’ve been sucked into something.”

Yue muttered while walking by Hajime’s side and looking at their reflections in the walls.

The worlds piled up inside the ice walls repeated endlessly, the deepest parts being shrouded in darkness. Yue’s words were truly right on the mark.

Hajime gently grasped Yue’s hand.

“I won’t let go of you so it’s alright.”

“… Nn.”

“You guys, can you not stop flirting at every occasion?”

Shizuku’s reproachful eyes dug into Hajime and Yue who were exchanging smiles. However, their love had already far exceeded the maximum theoretical threshold. Such a remark didn’t make them flinch.

Giving a sidelong glance to Shizuku who sighed, the group continued advancing.

They had not encountered the sign of any traps or monsters in a while and the compass was indicating that they were on the right way when Kouki suddenly halted and started looking around restlessly.

Shizuku, representing the group who grew suspicious of his behavior, inquired.

“Kouki? What’s the matter?”

“Ah, no well, didn’t you hear something just now? Something like someone’s voice. Rather, a whisper like this…”

“Wa-Wait a minute Kouki-kun, Stop. We already had our fill of this at Merujiine’s Undersea Ruin.”

It seemed Kouki could hear someone’s whisper. Since she didn’t think it possible for anyone else to actually be there beside them, Kaori whose tolerance of horror was weak tightly hugged herself with both arms while raising a voice of protest.

“Isn’t there anyone else who heard something? Shia?”

Hajime quietly narrowed his eyes and looked around to confirm.

“No. I didn’t hear anything. And I sense no sign of anyone else here besides us.”

Shia who had closed her eyes and focused her rabbit ears answered while shaking her head negatively. The other members who also seemed not to have heard anything, in particular, all shook their heads in negation.

“… Surely, I thought I heard something…”

“Are you sure you’re not overthinking this?”

“… Maybe I am.”

Understanding he was the only one who heard it, Kouki wondered if it was his imagination as he showed a bewildered expression. A concerned Ryuutaro who displayed a face lacking his usual self-confidence also agreed.

"… Shia."

"Got it."

While everyone was thinking it was Kouki's imagination, only Hajime, with a look reminding them to be careful, passed on his thought to Shia who could be relied on to search for the enemy in such circumstances. Shia also thought it was only Kouki's imagination, but since she was given a request by Hajime, she obediently nodded her head in approval. Her rabbit ears shook.

Then, they kept advancing without any problems, crossing several junctions without getting lost, until Kouki halted one more time.

This time, he shouted.

"Ah, again! It wasn't my imagination after all! I heard it again!"

"Ko-Kouki?"

Shizuki and the others turned a bewildered look to Kouki who was frantically searching for the owner of the voice.

From the gazes turned to him, Kouki guessed no one besides him had heard the voice this time as well, and raised a chaotic voice.

"It's true! This time, I heard it clearly! It said: 'Is it fine like this?'!"

"No, Kouki. I didn't hear anything?"

"Shit! Who are you! Where are you! How about showing your face without sneaking around!"

"Kouki, calm down."

Anxious to be the only one to hear, Kouki had turned around and let out these harsh words at the empty space. Shizuku and the others moved to try to calm him down.

"Shia."

"No, me neither. I really didn't hear anything…"

Hajime checked with Shia for confirmation, but it seems Shia's rabbit ears did not grasp the sound of any voice this time either.

"… Hajime. Any magical response?"

"None. It was the same with the zombies back then, it would seem the ice walls most likely have some kind of ability which conceals any magical response. The demon eye stone can't really be relied on here."

“Fumu. There’s also the possibility of having lost to the great labyrinth’s pressure and our minds having been confused… But still, this is too sudden. It would be more reasonable to assume we are receiving some kind of interference.”

“But Shia’s ears can’t hear anything, and on top of that Hajime can’t sense anything. There is nothing we can do to stop it.”

While Hajime and the others were discussing, Kouki was desperately trying to find the owner of the voice to prove he had not gone insane. At this point, Hajime spoke to him.

“Amenogawa, for now, calm down.”

“… Nagumo, it’s true. I’m sure I heard it…. …”

“I know. I don’t intend to dismiss this issue saying it’s your imagination.”

“Eh?”

Having gotten used to receiving harsh treatment from Hajime, Kouki’s eyes started going in circles after he heard these words which seemed to indicate he believed him.

“We should assume we are receiving some kind of interference. If it’s one of the trials of the labyrinth, then the possibility of not only you but everyone here receiving the interference is high. Currently, I can’t think of a way to counter this. Everyone, be on your guard.”

Hajime turned a serious gaze towards the others. They exchanged glances once and nodded.

Indeed, instead of rejecting the fault on Kouki’s imagination, to deny the existence of an unexplainable phenomenon, it was better to word it as the labyrinth’s ‘interference’. He believed Kouki’s words. It wouldn’t be strange for such a phenomenon to happen since they were challenging a great labyrinth after all.

Kouki was showing a very complicated expression, but he seemed to have calmed down for now. He was silently following behind Hajime who had resumed walking while having ominous thoughts about their images reflected in the ice walls.

And then,

——– You did not believe

“Uu, again…”

A whisper smoothly entered Kouki’s ear one more time. But since he had given some thought to Hajime’s words about a possible interference from the great labyrinth and readied himself, he was not thrown into confusion this time.

It was hard to say if he was calm deep down, but he was now able to try to look for the origin of the voice calmly. Then, Kouki suddenly realized something.

“…… Have I already heard this voice?”

Somehow he had a feeling he had already heard this voice. Shizuku and the others turned a worried look to Kouki who had tilted his head and was searching his memory.

“Kouki. Are you okay?”

“Ah, Yes. I’m fine. I was just thinking, I may have already heard that voice somewhere……”

“… There were monsters with the ability to mimic people’s appearance and voice at the Haltina Sea of Trees. Maybe they’re imitating someone we know. Don’t be deceived. If something happens, say it immediately.”

“Thank you, Shizuku. You be careful too. If Hajime is right, you might hear a voice too sooner or later.”

“Got it. I’ll be careful.”

Kouki sensed his disordered mind had calmed down and was able to show some composure to Shizuku who was smiling faintly. He returned a smile to his childhood friend who always encouraged and supported him.

—– You have realized, right?

However, his face immediately stiffened at the voice which once again resounded. He got unpleasant goosebumps after being unable to brush away the uneasiness dwelling in his heart born from the whispers he heard.

Kouki unintentionally turned his head towards Shizuku who was walking by his side with a face seeming to request help.

However, the look of concern he was expecting to see on his childhood friend’s face was nowhere to be seen. Instead, she displayed an expression about as stiffened as the reflection of his own face in the ice walls.

“Shizuku…….”

“……Yeah. I just heard it too. It was a woman’s voice. I have also heard it somewhere before. ‘Averting your eyes again?’ is what it said.”

“… Mine was a male voice saying ‘You have realized, right?’. It looks like the words change according to the person who hears the voice.”

Kouki and Shizuku were looking at each other with complicated expressions, and next, ‘Hyaaa!’. Suzu slightly jumped with a shriek. It seems Suzu could hear it as well now.

Furthermore, Ryuutaro, who also seemed to have heard it, became confused and started looking around.

“What did it say to you guys?”

Hajime asked them about the content while looking over his shoulder.

Once he had heard everyone’s description of what they heard, he was planning on putting them together to figure out the aim of the great labyrinth.

“Um, Suzu heard something like Kouki. (TL: She’s talking in the third person). ‘You had really realized, right?’ is what it said.”

“Ah, mine was ‘What is there the need to hesitate for?’ .”

Both were making a seemingly displeased expression. A discomfort revealed itself on their faces, the kind of feeling of someone’s heart being tread upon by muddy feet.

“… That’s too abstract. I feel it’s too indirect to be able to seduce anyone…”

Hajime tilted his head. These were no words such as ‘Do this and that’ or ‘Go here and there’ which could immediately lead people astray from their goal.

“You two. Had you heard that voice before?”

“Un. Now that you mention it, I feel like I had heard it somewhere… maybe.”

“I also have the feeling I had already heard it.”

They nodded to Tio in confirmation. The words whispered varied but in the end, they were all whispered by a familiar voice or so it seemed.

“… Anyway, we have to move forward.”

“Maa, that’s right.”

They had a bad feeling, but stopping and worrying would do no good. Once they got out of the maze, maybe the whispering would stop. So, as Yue said, they should move forward for now.

After deciding to proceed forward, they came across multiple forks and kept going without getting lost. According to the information given by the compass, there were three kilometers left in a straight line until the exit. Because they wouldn’t get lost, even if they ran into traps or monsters, they could get there in not even half a day.

They hurried forward while doing their best to ignore the whisper which would be heard intermittently.

However, as time passed, the frequency of the whispers increased, and before they knew it, Hajime and his group started hearing it too.

—— You will be betrayed again

Yue heard. Those were toxic words which caused her to remember that she had once placed her trust in her uncle, family, and fellow retainers. ‘Again’. Yue could very well guess the meaning of these words.

—— You will lose them again by your own fault, you know?

The voice made Shia’s rabbit ears tremble. The origin of the tragedy which took away the lives of countless of her family members was indeed Shia’s own birth. It had taken root deep inside Shia’s heart and caused her to have countless nightmares. The voice was constantly reminding her of their death cries. Now, she had plenty of ‘important ones’ close to her she absolutely didn’t want to lose.

—— There is no such thing as your being accepted by others

Tio heard the voice which had invaded her mind whisper to her smoothly.

Long ago, when she was inexperienced and couldn't control her power, and her family was facing persecution… Fire surged, the sound of an explosion shook the atmosphere, a scream and an angry roar reverberated. While she was kicking at the gathered remains of her compatriot, the surrounding eyes were staring at her with extreme fear and contempt…

—— You're jealous to the point you want to kill, isn't that right?

Whispered a voice which had invaded Kaori's inner heart. Kaori unconsciously turned towards the girlfriend who was showing an air of composure and stood at a place Kaori couldn't reach even after swapping bodies and obtaining power. Something black gushed out and started spreading out like black ink spilling on a white sheet of paper.

"Ah. I get it. This is my own voice."

Everyone who was having their consciousnesses torn apart by the whispers were taken aback by Hajime's sudden declaration.

"… Hajime?"

Hajime answered Yue's inquiring gaze while not particularly looking bothered by the whispers.

"Everyone, you said you had already heard the voice whispering to you right? Same goes for me, but the voice whispering to me is my own voice. Back when I was helping my father make games, I had the opportunity to listen to my own voice many times when doing voice tests. Since if you listen to your own voice, you are bound to feel some sense of discomfort. It's hard to realize, but I can assure you after having listened to my own voice countless times that the voice whispering to me is my own voice."

'Ah now that you mention it…' was the expression starting to form on everyone's face. Your own voice you hear when you speak in everyday life tends to unexpectedly differ from your recorded voice which you listen to. Therefore, they had been unable to recognize their own voice.

"But, if that's true, then what the voice is saying…"

"… It could be a voice coming from deep within your heart… maybe. Reviving various unpleasant memories."

"… Right. It feels as if our mind is being invaded and trampled by muddy shoes. It's extremely unpleasant."

Tio, making a guess, stated what a frowning Kaori was hesitating to say. Shia agreed. The others uniformly showed dark, grim faces.

Overall, the atmosphere could be said to be still. Shizuku, who realized this, raised her voice in an attempt to change the mood and spoke to Hajime and Yue who were looking calm and composed for some reason.

"Nagumo-kun and Yue don't seem to be affected very much, is that correct? Do you have some kind of countermeasure?"

Hajime and Yue exchanged glances. Then, Hajime wore a composed expression, while Yue showed a somewhat bewitching smile.

“What if I say I am just not paying particular attention to it?”

“… What did you hear?”

“Ah ~ something like ‘Do you think a murderer could live such a thing as a normal life?’ or ‘There is no place where a monster belongs, right?’ or things along those lines, repeatedly. I don’t think there’s anything really different.”

“That’s… referring to when we return to Japan?”

“Ah, that’s right. Maa, it’s also hard to say if I’m human after all. Maybe I’m wondering deep down if I will be able to get used to my former life again.”

To Hajime who was making a self-analysis quite indifferently, Kouki whose gloomy face showed more and more anguish as time passed managed to squeeze out a voice.

“Then, how do you manage to remain calm? You who are ready to forsake this world’s inhabitants and want to return home, after being told multiple times that even if you managed to make it back, you’d have no place where you belong, how the hell can you stay so calm!”

Kouki demanded an explanation. He was no longer able to hold back his irritation at the end of his sentence and his voice roughened. It looks like the voice he was hearing from his heart was considerably shaking his mind.

Hajime simply shrugged his shoulders and answered.

“Don’t lose your temper. Actually, even though I won’t know the answer until I try going back, worrying about it now is pointless, right?”

“How can you be convinced so easily? It’s something you can’t ignore, something which enters your mind and you can’t throw out, something there is nothing you can do about!”

Just what kind of voice did you hear? Kouki was almost yelling those words at Hajime while hiding his fury caused by hatred somewhere within him.

Hajime faced the emotionally unstable Kouki with a somewhat serious look.

“First, from wishing things to ‘be your way’, greed will be born. Next, to appease that greed, your heart will take a decision. Then, all that needs to be done is to carry out this decision to the end. You shouldn’t be worrying about things like: ‘Will I be able to do it or not?’ but rather: ‘What should I do to carry out this decision?’… I have already decided. I will return to my hometown and live a normal life with Yue and the others. I will show them lots of splendid things and introduce them to my parents. I will put my life on the line for that. There is no time to worry about something as trivial as the anxiety that rose from the decision I made.”

“… That’s absurd. Such a thing…”

“It’s not like I’m asking you to understand. Maybe my way of thinking isn’t very human-like.”

Hajime wouldn't waver no matter what he was told, no matter what was done to him. Kouki felt he saw the main points of Hajime's unwavering mind and didn't think he could understand them. However, he averted his gaze as he seemed to realize something.

Inside the delicate atmosphere, Shia's face, which was irritated due to the uneasiness caused by the whispers, was replaced with a friendly smile as she started looking for Yue.

It seems that Shia was also able to easily slip away from the abusive thoughts caused by the unpleasant whispers. Her mood quickly turned from the gloomy one caused by this place to her usual innocent one.

Despite also being seized in anguish originally, Shizuku, who had been able to guess what was going on to some extent and had been speaking to Hajime, was now completely silent, reflecting on Hajime's previous words as if she had realized something.

"I get it that Hajime-san is not being affected thanks to his shamelessness, but why does Yue-san look fine? Rather, what is Yue-san being whispered?"

Hajime's temple suddenly reacted to Shia's way of speaking of him, but it seems he read the mood and decided to let her off with it for now. Of course, the night after the capture of the great labyrinth, she will be made to cry in lots of different ways.

Yue who aroused Shia's interest answered with no particular hesitation.

"… It's repeatedly telling me I will be betrayed some way or another."

"Betrayed… If I'm not mistaken, like in your past…"

"… Nn. So things like 'Hajime and Shia will also betray you'."

Upon hearing these words, Hajime and Shia exchanged glances. If those whispers really stem from one's unconscious, it means Yue is fearing betrayal from the bottom of her heart.

Indeed, Yue had been betrayed by the family and retainers she put her trust in and had been locked up in darkness for three hundred years. That's more than reason enough for it to become a trauma, and it wouldn't be strange if she felt ill to the point of not ever trusting anyone else anymore.

Actually, putting aside Hajime and Shia, her interaction with others could be said to be fairly cold sometimes. Fundamentally, earning Yue's trust was quite difficult. Luckily, her encounter with Hajime made her believe that putting her trust in others was still possible… But maybe the uneasiness of being betrayed again still dwelled within her heart, even if just a little.

Even more, than her memories of her severe betrayal, this was something that couldn't be helped. She was not actually suspecting that she'd be betrayed again. Rather, this was something carved deep within her unconscious.

However, naturally, there was trust in Hajime and Shia that easily surpassed such a trauma. A fantastic encounter and the things she saw on the journey that followed had appeased her heart. Which is why she was calm.

Sensing her feelings, Shia gave her a soft smile and spoke.

“Ne, Fufu, if you let your guard down, I might betray you-”

“… Bad girl. Punishment is needed for lying rabbits.”

With Yue and Shia resuming their frivolous talk, the atmosphere seemed to slightly return to normal.

“Maa, certainly, there is no way I am letting go of Yue…”

“Indeed. It would be much more likely to be told that the world is getting destroyed tomorrow than Goshujin-sama betraying Yue.”

A triumphant look settled on Hajime and Tio’s face. Indeed, Hajime and Yue’s atmosphere was so sweet that it felt like a mix of Calpis (TL: Japanese milk-based soft drink) with sugar, syrup, and honey. If you were told one would betray the other, you could only reply ‘Ha?’.

“… Nn. It’s impossible. But even if I was betrayed, it would be of no concern.”

Yue agreed with Hajime and Tio’s words, but as if she had thought of something along the way, she made an assumption as her pupils sparkled with mischief.

“What do you…?”

With an air of composure, Yue responded to Hajime and the others who tilted their heads.

“Because regardless of Hajime’s feelings, I am not letting go of him.”

“…” X4

While everyone fell strangely silent, Yue, who was licking her thin pink lips with her tongue, suddenly narrowed her eyes. No one was able to take their eyes from her wet lips which frightfully stood out. Simultaneously, she began emitting a charm that sent shivers down everyone’s spine, male or female indiscriminately and made their abdomens feel hot.

Then, with a hot, long breath.

“… Fufu, you can’t run away from the vampire princess.”

She declared such a thing.

Hajime, who was caught in the overly bewitching atmosphere and her hot gaze, had his arms suddenly held behind his back by Shia who showed a splendid reaction time.

If not for her, there’s no mistaking Hajime would probably already be on top of Yue. No matter how you looked at him, he was no longer thinking straight. He was looking at Yue like a beast.

For a little while, the unproductive argument continued between Shia and the others who were trying to prevent a love affair in the middle of the capture of a great labyrinth and Hajime who was wishing for nothing but Yue.

At any rate, for the time being, it seems the oppressive atmosphere caused by the whispers was gone.

Chapter 141 – The Brunt of Feelings

“Aa, geez! Cut it outttt!”

In a small room in the eastern part of the great labyrinth, Shia's angry voice resounded followed by a creaking noise.

The source of the noise was Hajime's arm, which was in an arm-lock (TLN: the term used is Ude-Hishigi-Juji-Gatame, a grappling technique from Kodokan Judo).

"What are you doing, Shia? His arm looks like it's about to break."

"What are you saying with this calm face? Rather, Yue-san, please stop with the provocations!"

"… Nn. Hajime wishes for me but has to hold himself back because we're inside the maze… cute."

"Now's neither the time nor the place for this!" Shia violently retorted.

Of course, her arm-lock over Hajime did not budge in the slightest. It was proof of her remarkable growth. Something to rejoice about.

Or so it should have been. She was holding Yue in her arms nonchalantly and threatening the approaching Hajime with a judo locking technique. There was really nothing to rejoice about.

They were currently taking a short break in a small room close to a junction of the labyrinth.

More precisely, the break was intended to let Kouki and the others rest. They were in low spirits from the disorder caused by the whispers. However, for some reason, the more intense the whispers grew, the greater a chance it became for Hajime and Yue to assure their mutual love, which had gone past the point of reason. 'You're flirting far too much inside a great labyrinth, Koraa!' was probably what Shia thought as she stepped in to hold them back.

"Calm down, Shia. We're in the great labyrinth, you know? It's not like we're really going to start acting without restraint here, right?"

"… Just now, weren't you about to kiss?"

"That was just Yue replenishing her energy."

Hajime tried to exploit this opportunity and came up with this explanation, showing a firm face. But a mere glance at Yue by his side, who had narrowed her eyes while licking her lips, would be enough to make his declaration really suspicious.

"But I didn't see her using her magic to the point she would need to replenish."

Shia replied with an unusually sharp observation and tightened her grip on Hajime's arm further.

"No mercy, huh… "

"Th- That's because he's my lover. So I will have my say about things that go too far!"

"Shia… Good girl."

Shia blushed slightly as she gave her reasoning. Hajime and Yue let out a 'Ho' and voiced their admiration. Then they corrected their postures.

So far, Shia had always followed Hajime and Yue from behind. However, now that she had been acknowledged by Hajime, it seemed she came to the realization that she could stand on equal ground with Yue.

She used to watch the two from behind and deal with things she didn't like from a distance. But now she was walking side by side with them and wouldn't hesitate to take their hands and pull.

"Fumu, indeed, just like a lover."

"Un. Indeed."

Tio let out a weak murmur, exposing her mental fatigue. Next to her, Kaori forced a bitter smile as she agreed. There was envy in her eyes.

"…"

"Shizu, Shizu? Is something up?"

"Eh? No, it's nothing? More importantly, is Suzu okay?"

Seeing Shizuku watching Hajime and the others silently, Suzu raised a voice of concern.

Suzu also felt the pain caused by the whispers which was somehow similar to that of a needle piercing the heart. But she also remembered what it felt like to be truly stabbed and could somehow put up with the pain. However, she noticed no one was paying attention to Shizuku who didn't seem to be doing so well.

Usually, Shizuku would discreetly put aside her own feelings and only worry about others. Given her behavior, it was obvious that something was up.

However, or rather as expected, as soon as she was called by Suzu, Shizuku put on a delicate smile and replied to Suzu by questioning Suzu about her own well-being. Suzu's face certainly did not look very well either, but putting aside Shizuku's abstract words which didn't betray her condition, Shizuku should also be feeling exhaustion due to the whispers teasing her heart.

With a troubled smile, Suzu could only reply 'I'm fine' in order to not worry Shizuku over her and in the process forget taking care of herself.

"Oi, Kouki…"

"What is it, Ryuutaro?"

"Ah, no, nothing in particular. Let's just leave this sickening place quickly."

"Yeah."

Then again, Kouki was the person affected the most dangerously. Speaking almost no word at all, keeping replies only to a bare minimum when Shizuku, Ryuutaro or Suzu would voice their concern.

And then, there was also his look, which was getting increasingly intense and reflecting his negative feelings.

His look was directed at Hajime. Maybe the person himself wanted to take his eyes off of Hajime, but he was too obvious. Sometimes, he would also turn his gaze to Kaori. So it was not difficult to guess what he was being told by the whispers.

“Well then, how did it go? Everyone, did you get somewhat better?”

Tio asked, tilting her head. It had already been one hour since they started to rest. Tio had suggested they use spirit magic on everyone to stabilize their minds.

“Yup. Thanks, Tio. I feel that the inside of my head has become clear.”

“Un. Maybe my body also got a little lighter…”

After all, the whispers were mere voices. What was tormenting Shizuku’s mind was her being reminded of every bad memory and thought that had piled up inside her. That’s why, if the person herself was repeatedly worrying after being reminded of unpleasant memories, spirit magic wouldn’t be any help. It was only magic that could refresh one’s spirits temporarily.

Even so, compared to how they were before resting, the faces of Shizuku’s group had considerably regained their colors. Therefore, even taking into account the consumption of magical power the use of spirit magic required, it seemed to have been a wise choice.

Nevertheless, it seemed there was someone for whom that wasn’t the case.

“Ah. Thanks, Tio-san. I feel more comfortable.”

Although Kouki slightly smiled and expressed his thanks, there was an unmistakable weight in his voice which betrayed his statement. His face seemed shadowed somehow.

“Don’t thank me. More importantly, we must hurry up and get out of this maze. Goshujin-sama. How much is left?”

“U… n, let’s see. In a straight line, there’s not even one kilometer left. It won’t go well if we keep resting in this place, so we should go without stopping,” Hajime said and stood up with his compass in hand.

The others followed suit. The previous atmosphere when they were fooling around had completely vanished. Most of it was truly intended to refresh their spirits. Definitely, surely, maybe…

Shizuku and the others seemed to be feeling a little heavy. It had already been thirty hours since they entered the maze, and they had not gotten a wink of sleep. They had been using magic and magic potions to recover from the lack of sleep, but the mental fatigue caused by the whispers had been accumulating as well.

They resumed walking along the mirror-house-like passage. As usual, even after resting, the abstract whispers, using their own voices, were reverberating inside their ears unpleasantly and reminding them of things they disliked. The frost ogres coming after them sporadically, along with the annoying traps, were clearly meant to make them drop their concentration and significantly increased the danger.

“Shit.”

Just now, Kouki, who was following behind Hajime, received yet another surprise attack from an ogre, defeated it, and hit the ice wall with his fist while swearing.

—— It ended up like this again?

—— As I said, it will be stolen

—— If only I had power

And so the whispers continued. Kouki's frustration kept accumulating.

Then, at that time, he had an uncomfortable feeling after looking up at his own image reflected in the ice wall ahead. It's not that something was strange. What was being reflected was his own face. It's just that he was looking at himself devoid of any expression. But strangely, he couldn't stop staring.

"… What the hell?" Kouki muttered unintentionally.

Then, he became aware of the true reason of his uncomfortable feeling and a shiver ran down his spine.

His face reflected in the ice wall stood as firm as a rock… expressionless. Neither his irritated frown nor the sight of his gritting his teeth out of exasperation, were anywhere to be seen. Also, his lips which were supposed to have been moving just now after he muttered something…

He stiffened and opened his eyes wide. The Kouki reflected before him… suddenly parted his lips.

"UwaAAAA!?"

"Ko-Kouki!? What happened!?"

"Are you okay, Kouki!"

Kouki jumped back from the ice wall after hearing the sudden strange voice. Shizuku and Ryuutaro became confused and called out to him. Hajime and the others also turned around to see what was going on and stared at Kouki in wonder.

Cold sweat was running down his spine, and his breathing rhythm was thrown out of order by the mental strain he felt. But still, he managed to draw and point his holy sword towards his reflected self in the ice wall. His reflection in the ice wall also drew his holy sword and did the same, with the same facial expression and breathing rhythm. Kouki no longer sensed the intense unpleasant feeling he had been feeling up until a few moments ago.

"Kouki?"

Shizuku approached him with a worried face and put her hand on his shoulder. He did not break his stance and kept breathing roughly. He suddenly came to and managed to regain some of his composure before opening his mouth.

"… In the wall, the me reflected in the wall laughed. Even though I didn't laugh… Just as if it were a different me…"

"Are you sure it wasn't your imagination?"

Shizuku took a breath after listening to Kouki's words and turned a serious gaze to Kouki's reflection in the ice wall, as well as her own.

However, Kouki quickly turned his face towards Shizuku. He was irritated.

"… You won't believe me?"

"Eh? No, it's not like I'm doubting you?"

It seemed Kouki thought Shizuku's words were expressing her doubts about what he stated. Of course, that wasn't Shizuku's intention. She just wanted confirmation from him. Actually, she had even turned a wary gaze towards the ice wall. That's why, when she heard Kouki's next sentence, she thought 'What could he be saying?' as her face became suspicious.

This seemed to irritate Kouki even further, and a sarcasm unlike him escaped his mouth.

"… If it was Nagumo, you would believe him easily, right?"

"Kouki? Really, what are you saying now? Didn't I tell you I believed you?"

Although Shizuku frowned angrily in response to his sarcasm for a moment, her face immediately became worried the next moment.

Kouki was able to calm down a little after seeing she was worried about him, but immediately after, her body suddenly started quivering as if she had just been whispered something. She then took a fleeting glance at Hajime. It was truly just a moment, as she averted her eyes right after she saw Hajime. But it seemed it was more than enough to make a heavy emotion well up inside Kouki.

"For now there's no sign of the reflections moving on their own… but let's be careful as much as possible."

Hajime had also been diligently observing their reflections using his demon eye stone, but he breathed out a sigh before long and gave the command to be careful. He ignored the argument between Kouki and Shizuku.

The other members had been listening to the argument and watching the two. When they received Hajime's order, they nodded and resumed walking.

Then, witnessing no such weird phenomenon such as their reflections' actions differing from their own, the party finally discovered a large room at the end of the passage. Inside the room, there were gigantic gates which had a design a lot like the previously sealed doors they saw. Because the gates had no dent where something could be inserted, unlike the previous sealed doors, it seemed they would not need to go through the trouble of doing something like collecting gems one more time. Checking the compass, it seemed there was no mistake about this place being their goal.

"Fuu, looks like we finally made it. These gates are the goal. However…"

"Nn… it's obviously suspicious."

"Right. You would normally expect to be attacked once you get here."

Having gotten tired of the maze as well, Hajime breathed a sigh of relief when he saw the goal and used his demon eye stone and perception abilities to search for the enemy. It was trivial that it would be far too easy and uninteresting for there not to be anything taking place in the big room right before the goal. Agreeing, Yue and the others started exercising caution.

"… As expected, no response. Maa, there's no choice left but to proceed."

As expected, Hajime perceived no magical response. He raised his eyebrows and walked ahead as the vanguard. Yue and the others followed behind.

Then, by the time they reached the center of the room, sure enough, it happened.

"Ah…? The sun?"

Hajime pronounced these words as he looked up towards the source from which light suddenly started pouring down. If Yue and the others were to look up as well, they could indeed only call this 'the sun'.

Shining from a single point in the spray of snow overhead, the light it emitted increased the brightness of the room significantly. Given that they were in a maze, it couldn't be the real sun, but the heat it generated could easily cause such a misapprehension.

"… Hajime. The surroundings."

As Hajime was looking up at the false sun with a grim face, Yue urged him to be careful. Accordingly, Hajime took his eyes off of the false sun, only to see something quite strange.

All the surroundings were glittering. The light coming through the spray of snow overhead was reflected on the ice crystals in the air. This phenomenon had a name: diamond dust.

However, compared to natural diamond dust, something was off. The glittering was obviously far too intense. It felt as though there were countless lamps floating in the air. Moreover, one part of the ice shard was shining increasingly bright moment by moment.

"… I smell something dangerous about this supposed diamond dust. Everyone, strengthen your defenses!"

To Hajime, these glittering ice shards were like small batteries that had saved up energy. He could tell because he used batteries to power his cross bits and send them flying. He issued a warning to the other members. They were stunned at the danger that presented itself before them and felt shivers down their spines.

It seemed like the analysis was correct.

They automatically regrouped. The moment Yue and Suzu cast 'Holy Interruption' there was a flash.

"Uh, it's like a high energy laser weapon."

As Hajime predicted, the countless ice shards floating in the room started unleashing the accumulated light as heat rays.

It seemed the thin, white rays weren't especially directed at Hajime's group but were scattering randomly, hitting both the ice walls and the ground. A 'Bi—' sound was heard as the rays struck the 'Holy Interruption' cast by Yue and Suzu and slipped through.

The rays were apparently fired completely randomly. In addition, the ice shards were rotating and moving randomly, making the trajectory of the rays unpredictable. Every second, there were additional scars in the ground and the ice walls. It goes without saying that this process scattered even more ice shards into the air. It was a vicious circle.

To make matters worse, as if it had just been dropped by the false sun, the spray of snow overhead started descending towards Hajime's party. At this rate, it would dramatically reduce their field of vision in a few seconds like in Haltina's Sea of Trees.

"Tsk. It'd be a bother to be wrapped up in smoke. We're running through in one go."

"Nn… Suzu, get ready."

"Y- yes, onee-sama!"

Following Hajime's instruction, Yue addressed Suzu to sync their timing. They were waiting for the moment the heat rays would turn away from them. Then, the moment all the rays disconnected, they would turn 'Holy Interruption' into shields that could be deployed on the surroundings, mimicking the defensive ability of Hajime's cross bits.

"Let's go!"

After Hajime issued his order, they all simultaneously broke into a run. Meanwhile, the heat rays were mercilessly attacking the shields of 'Holy Interruption' and quickly shaving them off, but Yue and Suzu would repeatedly repair them each time, so it could be thought they would have no trouble reaching the gates which were only a hundred meters away.

However, or rather, maybe we should say as expected, it wouldn't be that easy.

ZuDonn!!

With an earth tremor from the spray of snow that was approaching from above, several lumps of ice, each the size of a car, came falling down. They looked fairly heavy and broke the ground from the impact and left craters. The big ice lumps were so transparent that the other side could be seen. Maybe they were what they call 'pure ice'. In the heart of those ice lumps were dark red crystals. Their purpose was easy to guess.

"Tsk. My favorite." Hajime clicked his tongue.

As if acting accordingly, the shape of the lumps of ice immediately changed and turned into human-like forms of five meter in length. They held a halberd in one hand, and a tower shield in the other. They totaled nine. Exactly like the number of people in Hajime's party. Short and stout, just like golems, they lined up to block the exit.

"Let's scatter them."

The group nodded at Hajime's order and simultaneously entered combat mode to break through in one go.

Hajime started a pre-emptive attack with Donner and Schlag. The revolvers roared several times, sending high-power bullets aimed at the enemy's hearts.

However, the tower shields the frost golems were holding were unexpectedly solid, and even though they were smashed into small pieces after receiving the bullets, they managed to protect the golems, even if just barely. To withstand Donner and Schlag's attacks after their specs had been increased… It seems these golems had the best stamina among the monsters they had fought so far.

"But, there's no problem."

"It's as you say!"

"Let's scatter them away!"

Hajime muttered as he spun his gun and reloaded. Shia and Tio confirmed his statement and respectively fired explosive slug bullets and dragon breath. Simultaneously, the other members unleashed their skills, except for Yue and Suzu who were focusing on defense.

Kouki used 'Soaring Blade Quake', Kaori used 'Decomposition Bombardment', Shizuku flew and slashed and Ryuutaro used 'Shock Wave' —— at each other.

"Uh!?"

"Eh?"

The shining slash Kouki unleashed directly made its way towards Hajime. Judging from Kouki's slanted position behind Hajime, and the frost golems he was aiming at, there was no way he could have mistakenly slashed at Hajime.

(EN: This is where bakapervert's translation takes over.)

The way Kouki was moving and the dumbfounded expression on his face as if he couldn't understand why spoke more eloquently than anything about how unforeseen the situation was.

At the same time as that, Kaori's silver bombardment which carried her disintegration ability went at Yue, Shizuku's slash went to Shia, Ryuutaro's shockwave was approaching Hajime similar to Kouki.

Without delay, Hajime jumped out of the way without losing a breath, catching and evading Kouki's attack while his crimson magic power clashed with Ryuutaro's shockwave, neutralizing the attack as Hajime escaped from the danger. Yue also twisted the trajectory of the silver bombardment using the satellite of 'Calamity Sky', while Shia was rotating and sweeping away Shizuku's slash using Doryuken.

"… What are you planning?"

"… Kaori, that's some nerve."

"Shi, Shizuku-san? Ha-have I hurt your feelings?"

The frost golem approached with a tremor on the ground and the spray of snow was already descending until a few meters over their head. There was no free time to be wasted, but as expected there was no way they could just leave alone the strange action of Kouki and others as merely a joke. Hajime and the others who received the attack were directing their gazes at the unexpected attackers.

Kouki and others who were perplexed at their own deed returned to their senses and showed fierce unrest at the same time.

“Yo-you are wrong! I, didn’t intend anything like that… but when I noticed… I’m saying the truth-!”

“Ye-yeah, that’s right! I don’t have any intention to attack Nagumo-! Believe me!”

“Tha-that’s true! Truly when I noticed the attack was already heading at Yue… why do I… such a thing…”

“I’m sorry Shia! But, I also don’t understand why that happened. I planned to cut the enemy yet…”

Kouki and others made excuses desperately. It seemed that unconsciously their bodies moved mostly by themselves and their targets changed completely. Hajime frowned while he was checking the breath unleashed by the frost golems. Tio immediately spoke the conjecture he formed.

“Goshujin-sama. Just before they attacked, I felt like I heard the whispering voice, though… possibly.”

“Chih, you are saying that’s something like mind incitement?”

“I don’t know if that is all. Goshujin-sama. Yue, Shia, and I art not affected, don’t thou think that’s not a coincidence?”

“… Troublesome. It’s hard to cancel interference at the territory of the subconscious.”

If they were brainwashed by magic, it would suffice to heal them using regeneration magic or Kaori’s abnormal status recovery. However, until the end, this was a mind incitement. In addition, it was interference to the subconscious. As expected, even Yue would have a hard time dealing with such a thing. If it had to be said, the scientific factor here was stronger than the magical factor.

“Now that it has come to this, beating all of them up until just a step before death is…”

Hajime’s look showed how troublesome he felt the situation was, his eyes narrowed dangerously while his gaze swept through Kouki, Ryuutaro, Shizuku, and Kaori in turn. He began to speak dangerous words. Kouki and the others took a step back, wanting to be spared from that because they weren’t an old television that could be fixed by getting hit. Cold sweat flowed down their cheeks.

While they were doing such things, the snow spray that covered the air above was coming to the ground.

“Geez-, in the end, what are we going to do?”

A crowd of Frost golem was pushing in from the front. There was a poor field of vision where it had become hard to even see the person at their side. On top of that, there were allies that might make friendly fire.

Suzu was defending against the laser attack with a desperate look that spoke roughly towards Hajime and others still in a standstill.

Inside the space where their field of vision was being closed second by second by the snow spray, at the moment where the figure of their comrades vanished, Hajime raised his voice.

“Everyone, attack without reservation and smash the golems!”

The mind incitement and the snow spray were the trials that the great labyrinth prepared. If everything was covered in mist blocking their vision, the possibility that their attack would be guided into ally was large. No, rather, if it was not like that then it wouldn’t be a trial. So nine out of ten while they couldn’t see each other only their attack would be aiming accurately at their ally.

Hajime said those words for exactly that reason. The people aimed at were Hajime, Yue, and Shia. He figured the friendly fire of the likes of Kouki and others just didn’t matter.

“Well, if the attack is guided at anybody else other than us… my condolences to them.”

He became unable to detect the presence of Yue and others, the whole surface of his sight became pure white, Hajime murmured to himself inside such space. They had decided by themselves to challenge the great labyrinth. It wouldn’t do for them to completely rely on other people. They had to do something by themselves against something of only this level. After all, he had followed up somewhat for them until they arrived here already.

And at that time, several streaks of laser cut through the veil of the snow spray and approached narrowly. It seemed that the laser didn’t damp down even inside this snow spray. He couldn’t see them coming until just before it hit, so the troublesomeness of the attack increased further.

However, Hajime’s foot took a step back, his head tilted, and his body shifted slightly. He dodged everything just like that. For Hajime who was in a state where ‘Light Speed’ was activated, even if it was the bullet of his own railgun he could easily evade it with leisure if he caught sight of it within thirty centimeters from his body. To say nothing of the likes of the ultra-hot laser. It was easy to sense using ‘Heat Source Detection’ so there was no problem at all.

Right after Hajime evaded the laser,

GOU!! Such strong wind came along with an ice halberd that was nearly transparent which swung down at him. That too was easily evaded by lowering one of his legs which made only half his body visible. The attacker was of course a frost golem.

The frost golem struck at Hajime and the halberd which split the ground was swept horizontally using brute force in pursuit. The strong wind howled once more. The ice surface was smashed up explosively, ice fragments scattered toward the direction where the halberd was swung.

But, the figure of Hajime wasn’t there anymore. The frost golem also stiffened for a moment after losing sight of Hajime’s figure.

“You’re a slow guy, just like you appear.” That voice colder than the surrounding’s temperature resounded from diagonally behind the frost golem.

Ahead of the gaze of the frost golem that turned back in shock——at the tip of the halberd, he swung, Hajime’s figure was there. Unnoticed, Hajime got on the head of the halberd with Schlagen readied, its

muzzle aimed steadily at the golem's heart. The bursting sparks illuminated the colorless transparent frost golem crimson.

The frost golem wasted no time to swing around the halberd trying to drop Hajime, but he was already checkmated.

Therefore,

DOU-!!

Along with such a sound, the magic stone along with the frost golem's upper body were blown away and became splinters.

Hajime jumped back from the destroyed Frost golem. There, the snow spray was blown away as a shining slash flew at him. Following after that a shockwave also came flying from another direction.

"Whoops. As expected, I can be aimed at even inside this snow spray."

Hajime was evading laser while smiling wryly because the situation went as expected. The snow spray before his eyes began to whirl. Hajime narrowed his eyes at what was happening this time.

That whirl became a spiral that looked like a tornado and stretched in a straight line. Like an eye of a typhoon, there was not a single ice fragment inside the center of the spiral. It seemed that the laser was also not passing through there. And then, ahead of the spiral became the door that was their goal.

"… So there is a golem for each person. Mind incitement and laser storm. So this place is telling us to slip through those and defeat the golem, huh. Now then, I wonder if Amanogawa and the rest can clear this?"

Hajime who easily cleared the trial sent a glance at the direction from where the slash and shockwave came, then he shrugged and began to walk calmly toward the goal through the tunnel of snow spray.

"Again-"

Without even any time to be conscious of the swearing that leaked out reflexively, Shizuku desperately dodged the approaching colorless and transparent halberd along with the strong wind.

She let fly a slash to the direction beyond. Because her posture crumbled and her opening was prodded, she was unable to dodge satisfactorily. A cutting sound could be heard, several strands of front hair were torn off while cold flecks of condensation coming out from the passing brutal blade.

Shizuku collapsed from her back while making use of that momentum to somehow stand back up. She then grandly heaved out a breath she had been holding this whole time. It was as though that breathing was read. This time, countless heat rays were approaching from all directions to bisect her.

"Kuh."

If she was touched it would be an instant death. She leaped backward to evade the heat ray while feeling a high temperature on her back and over her head.

Shizuku got through the line of death in a hairbreadth with acrobatic movements. This time, a wall was approaching while not giving her time to catch her breath. That was the tower shield of the frost golem

that charged ahead without caring for the lasers that were running in all directions at the surroundings. The transparent ice shield with a thickness that reached thirty centimeters looked like a wall from this close.

The body blow using the shield that came almost at the same time with her landing was already impossible to dodge. And then, the might of the attack was tremendous with the mass of the frost golem.

“Guuuuuuuh!!”

Wasting no time, Shizuku somehow softened the momentary impact of the charge by leaping behind, but as expected, the impact assaulting her whole body caused her to leak out an anguished voice unintentionally.

Even so, she obstinately drew out her black katana even while being blown away from fear of whether she was going to be pursued or not.

“Cut apart, ‘Soaring Claw’!”

However, the flying out invisible blade veered off greatly to the right, contrary to Shizuku’s intention. That was only natural. That was because her body moved subconsciously and her arm swing aimed at the beyond. Surely there was someone who was supposed to be ahead of that slash.

Shizuku who struck the ground while gritting her teeth wondering whether she had attacked her ally once again stood up desperately even while her breathing got caught up. And then she determined herself that in this battle, long range technique shouldn’t be used as expected.

Hajime said to them to fight without reservation, but even before that the opening after her technique veered off was too large. Misusing techniques in a battlefield where life and death was decided in milliseconds was fatal.

Besides, indeed if it was Hajime and others then they would surely deal with the attack coming at them easily, but the fact that she was attacking her ally would return damage mentally to herself.

There was also the matter that her misfire was a bother to others, and most of all, just what did her attack suggest…

——Actually I’m jealous

She couldn’t help but be conscious of that.

“Gofuh, shu-shut up-!”

She coughed violently and slightly spit out blood. It seemed that she had internal damage. She convinced herself that drawn out battle was dangerous while wiping the blood with her hand. Then in Shizuku’s ears, the whispering voice resounded once more. She involuntarily raised an angry voice that exposed her irritation.

——Why is it only me?

“I told you to shut up already!”

The frost golem approached with a tremor through the ground. Even while buying distance with a back step, her billowing heart didn't settle down. For an instant, at the moment when her attention was divided, a laser ran through as though aiming for that timing. It shallowly tore Shizuku's shoulder.

At the corner of the gaze of Shizuku who came back to her senses from the pain, a heat ray from below that was scooping up was visibly approaching. Rather than an attack from the front with a pinpoint aim, this one was a sweeping horizontal attack. At this rate, Shizuku's torso would be bisected into two.

With the impact on her shoulder, her balance crumbled, and she was unable to dodge, Shizuku immediately put the black katana between the heat ray and her body. With the blade of her black katana, even if it was Shizuku's slender waist there was no possible way the blade could be a cover for her. 'I just need to prevent lethal wound!' Shizuku held such praying feeling, but at that point, it was as expected from Hajime's artifact.

Shizuku herself didn't intend for it by any means, but the blade of the black katana that was held with a subtle angle, regardless of its jet black color that seemed to suck in light, because it was polished to the extreme in pursuit of sharpness it somehow reflected the laser.

"He?"

Shizuku who escaped her predicament with unexpected method reflexively leaked out such a stupid voice.

There the frost golem was brandishing its halberd while charging forward. Shizuku returned to her senses with a 'hah' while bracing herself back, she stepped into the blind spot that was the side of the tower shield to evade while releasing powerful slash while passing over the golem.

"Sever apart, 'Flash Blossom'!!"

The space severance that was launched at the two's crossing splendidly severed the shield of the frost golem together with the arm holding it.

Lasers were rushing once more at Shizuku who was in continued alertness after passing through. But, Shizuku wasn't flustered anymore.

"Assemble, 'Drawn Sky'!"

The blade of the black katana that was lifted right overhead twisted the trajectories of the lasers or pulled them closer to the middle, drawing an unnatural line. And then the moment those lasers touched the blade, they were splendidly reflected, rushing into the frost golem that was right behind Shizuku trying to regenerate its arm.

As expected, it appeared the golem couldn't ignore getting hit by the focused laser from the front, the Frost golem lifted its halberd in place of the tower shield it lost, trying to escape from the threat of the laser that became two sizes thicker.

But Shizuku didn't permit it to do something like that. Even while continuing to reflect the laser, she corrected her stance so that the black katana was horizontal, and it went right into the sheath. And then she faced the Frost golem that couldn't move from the focused laser and stepped forward with a breath.

"Break, 'Scorch Wave'!!"

The thrust of the sheath spread ripples of dark blue color while at the next instant, a fierce impact was created. The place hit slipped through the defense of the halberd and gouged the golem's chest.

'Bishiri-!' The transparent ice had a large crack in it.

"Fly, 'Far Sky'! Demolish, 'Heavy Flash'!!"

In a flash, Shizuku flicked off the converged laser and mowed below the golem with a streak of the black katana.

'Heavy Flash'——it was an ability that cut apart the lynchpin of gravity itself and for a few seconds created a state of weightlessness.

Just as she aimed, the large body of frost golem that still had the sheath stabbed in it lightly floated.

"——!?"

"-aAAA!!"

The limbs of the frost golem flapped around from experiencing a completely unexpected situation while raising a soundless scream. During that time, Shizuku raised a spirited yell while using her sheath as the fulcrum to lift the Frost golem and crash it into the ground on her opposite side in one motion.

The appearance of a slender girl swinging around a five-meter giant looked unreal. The gravity cut by 'Heavy Flash' affected only the slashed coordinate, so after the golem was lifted to the opposite side it recovered its weight and free fell.

Therefore the frost golem was struck on its back with quite an impact, in the end, the sheath that was still stabbing in its body slid in even further. It was to the degree that the tip of the sheath arrived at its magic stone.

"This is the end, 'Scorch Wave'!!"

Even while breathing hard, Shizuku proclaimed the checkmate, granting the last impact for the enemy.

'Barin', such a sound was raised and the magic stone broke. The frost golem's shape crumbled.

"Haa haa… doing this myself is still just barely… isn't it?"

While supporting her body using the sheath, Shizuku floated a self-depreciating smile. She was able to defeat a monster of the great labyrinth under strict requirements, so there was no need to be that self-depreciating but……

At the other side of the tunnel of snow spray created before her eyes, Hajime, Yue, Shia, Tio, and Kaori were already there… she couldn't say anything.

Shizuku compared herself with Kaori who was rushing toward her with a worried look and smiled wryly while sheathing her black katana. The pleasant sound 'clink' it made was like the sound of a clapped hand in prayer at the shrine. It cleared the dark cloud in her heart just for a bit.

"… Doing this myself… that's also not quite true I guess?"

Looking at the black katana grasped in her hand, Shizuku muttered to herself like that. She was able to escape her predicament undoubtedly thanks to the present from he who was recently making her heart astir excessively.

For some reason, really for so…me reason Shizuku kissed the black katana. Till the end it was the expression of her thanks for her partner. By no means was she imagining a certain someone at the other side of the black katana. By no means!

Even so, perhaps growing embarrassed at her own act, Shizuku's cheeks faintly reddened and with fast gait she began to walk inside the tunnel while praying so that her burning face wouldn't be exposed to her approaching best friend.

Chapter 142 – One More Self

"Fuu, thank you, Kaori. I'm fine already now."

"I'm glad… You have a lot of injuries, it made me recall that time that I got flustered."

They had reached the final destination of the great labyrinth. After she finished healing Shizuku who was sitting down and leaning her back on the wall in front of that huge door, Kaori breathed out in relieve.

'That time' that Kaori mentioned was about the time when they were reunited with Hajime at [Orcus Great Labyrinth]. Shizuku tried to cut through the enemy line alone and became worn-out. They clung to each other with the determination to die when she recalled that unconsciously it drove her with uneasiness.

"Compared to that time this is far better right? At the very least I didn't get one of my arms broken. Just this much injury is just a minor thing, minor."

Shizuku tapped 'pon pon' on her arm that was previously broken while saying a manly thing to the teary-eyed Kaori. Something like 'call it a heavy wound when you get your arm done in!' wasn't something a normal high school girl could say.

"Sheesh, Shizuku-chan you really…"

Kaori floated a troubled smile to Shizuku who was being like that. Since the olden days, even when she was injured in kendo or sword practice, she was a girl that wouldn't even complain that it hurt. She would pretend to show endurance even while being teary-eyed. Rather than calling that obstinate, Kaori knew that a large part of that was so that Shizuku wouldn't make other people worry.

For that reason, she got worried for Shizuku who wouldn't whine or act spoiled. But at the same time, she also knew that if she continued to worry for her, Shizuku would only grin brightly while saying "It's fine!" So Kaori couldn't say anything.

And so, Kaori stayed quiet and only devoted herself to healing while snuggling up to Shizuku. Her body was healed, but the whispering voice that had tormented her mind didn't change. The balance of the mind could be more or less stabilized by soul magic, so Kaori embraced Shizuku's body while wrapping it up with light.

From a slightly distanced place, Hajime was standing still while staring at that scene. He looked admiring, or perhaps with an amused look. This was the kind of expression he was making.

“… What?”

“No, nothing? I’m just thinking, you two really have a good relationship, huh? That’s all.”

Shizuku acted threateningly to the grinning Hajime, but Hajime easily replied with a shoulder shrug.

“Hmm. Truly a beautiful friendship.”

“Isn’t that righttt-”

“… Just like lovers.”

Tio and Shia directed warm gaze at the two. But, only Yue floated a teasing smile at the corner of her mouth like Hajime and said something like that. Naturally, Kaori objected vehemently.

“Yueee! You are saying mean thing again!”

“… I don’t have a prejudice against relationships between fellow girls. May everlasting happiness be with you.”

“I *told* you! Don’t say anything weird!”

Because Kaori got irritated and talked back, the ‘S’ part inside Yue got agitated, but Kaori still hadn’t noticed that. Looking at an appearance that suggested Kaori wouldn’t separate from Shizuku even while complaining, it seemed like you could see an illusion of lilies blooming on their backs, yet the person herself was unaware.

Yue and Kaori began to quarrel like that. Shizuku, who was between the two of them, knitted her eyebrows in awkwardness and tried to mediate, but there was no significant result.

“Hey, Nagumo-kun. Don’t just smile, stop them.”

“Hm? It’s fine, isn’t it? It’s free time until Amenogawa and others return, anyway. Rather than that, how about saying ‘Stop! Don’t get into a fight because of me!’ Give that a try!”

“… What kind of indecisive woman do you think I am.”

Hajime chuckled ‘ku ku’ toward Shizuku who was glaring at him testily. Hajime stopped chuckling then and opened his mouth toward Shizuku, who was frowning even more in displeasure after seeing him enjoy this.

“Yaegashi, you, it’s better if you act a little more relaxed.”

“Yes?”

“I’m saying that you are too serious. Even now your mind got burdened by the whispering, right? Then, at this kind of time, it’s better if you make racket together with them and refresh yourself. After all, there is nobody here that you need to look after.”

“…”

Hajime's words made Shizuku opened her eyes wide. For some reason that even Shizuku didn't understand, she felt like her heartstring was stirred by that. It was though she heard words that were the opposite of the whispering voice…

Without really being concerned about Shizuku falling quiet, Hajime's mouth distorted into a mean grin.

"If you like, how about I lend you Shia's rabbit ears so that you can relax? Oh, Shizuku-chan who loves cute thing?"

"-, shut up! No thanks-! Rather stop your grinning!"

Shizuku objected with a voice that expressed her full displeasure while her cheeks reddened like an apple. But in the end, were her cheeks reddened because she was made fun of, or was it because she was suddenly called by her first name…

Shizuku's reaction made Hajime float a mean grin that was exactly the same with Yue when she was making fun of Kaori at the side. Perhaps realizing that it was pointless no matter what she said, Shizuku looked aside angrily with a huff.

And then from both sides, two gazes were stabbing at Shizuku who was displaying such a reaction that was cute in this certain situation. It was Yue and Kaori who stopped quarreling before anyone realized. Those two were 'jii—, staring unmovingly at Shizuku.

"Wha, what?"

"… Shizuku-chan got red. You are cuter more than usual."

"… Nn. You are delighted being bullied by Hajime."

"Wai-, I'm not delighted, and I'm not being cute at all! You two don't make fun of me!"

Shizuku herself complained while thinking that the two of them were ridiculing her, but as for Yue and Kaori, they were directing gazes filled with staggeringly deep suspicion at Shizuku. They had felt this since before but, it felt like it was gradually becoming stronger since they started traveling together from the royal capital.

"… It increased again?"

"Uu, thinking about the current situation, it feels like it's too late to object even if it increases by one more person after this far… besides if it's Shizuku-chan then rather…"

For an instant, Kaori and Yue's faces met each other, and it felt like they were expressing their respective thoughts and discussing something that was hard to ignore in regard to themselves. Shizuku was about to open her mouth unconsciously, at that time…

GOU!!

An intense torrent of magic power heaved up a spray of snow and thrust into the sky. Right after that, the bombardment of light that contained tremendous strength was blown away and the snow pushed forward straight at Hajime.

Hajime didn't really show any surprise and took out a metallic piece, the gate key, from his breast pocket before thrusting and twisting it at the space in front of him. Right after, a teleport gate opened in front of his eyes.

There, the torrent of light surged in while gouging away the ground. And then it flew out from the exit gate that was opened with the keyhole model artifact 'Gate Hole' put beside Hajime as the reference point. Like that the light flew beyond the horizon.

"Kouki!"

"That Amenogawa, he used 'Limit Break'… quite impatient is he."

Shizuku who guessed that just now was the chant-omitted version of 'Divine Might' stood up reflexively. Hajime too, it was already not visible due to snow blocking the way, but he was directing his gaze at the spot where the blow came from and murmured.

It was a self-evident truth that Kouki and Ryuutaro were having their consciousness incited so their attacks were aimed at Hajime. And so he made preparation to evade them using the reliable gate rather than defending. It seemed that, as expected, it was the correct decision.

There was no other attack coming at them even once while they were talking until now. Most likely that was because Kouki and others feared friendly fire and didn't use anything except close range skills. But it seemed just now Kouki got cornered into a desperate situation and attempted to break the deadlock. Right about this time, his face was surely going pale because his attack flew in the wrong direction.

"Now then, as expected, Amenogawa who used 'Limit Break' will clear this after a few minutes. The problem is the other two, though…"

"Eh? I… is Kouki okay I wonder?"

Looking at Hajime easily averting his gaze, Shizuku called out with a worried expression. Her gaze kept taking a glance at the direction where Kouki seemed to be. She looked like she was going to rush there for support, even now.

Toward such a Shizuku who in a certain meaning could be said to be overprotective, Hajime sent her an exasperated face while adding his words.

"That guy still has the derivative skill of 'Limit Break' right? Then, there is still leeway until he is forced to use that. Besides, the clear condition of this great labyrinth is perhaps for one person to defeat one golem you know? Even if you help him right now, for him, it's not something desirable."

"That's… perhaps that's true."

"Haa, that's why Yaegashi is too meddlesome. Because of that, you are also called something like 'mom'."

"Just who is this mom? The one saying that is just Nagumo-kun! Really, that's rude!"

For now, Shizuku went angry with her continuing words while consenting to what Hajime said. Hajime easily ignored her and this time he took out a compass from his breast pocket. What he wished for was 'the whereabouts of Taniguchi Suzu'.

"… That way."

"Hajime-kun. Ryuutaro-kun and Suzu-chan are…"

"Wait, I'm checking right now. Rather than the attacker Sakagami, I think the defensive Taniguchi is more in a deadlock…"

Saying that, Hajime let fly a crossbit following the guide of the compass. Crossbit's 'distant penetration stone' vanished inside the snow and as expected, only projected the color of snow. But after a while, a faint radiance began to be visible on the other side of that veil.

The crossbit that reached Suzu's location climbed up and probed the situation from an overlooking view. Thereupon, it seemed that both sides of Suzu and the frost golem were surrounded by 'Holy Severance'.

The lasers mowing down from all directions were blocked by normal 'Holy Severance' while it seemed the frost golem was being melted by an inside barrier that was turned into high-temperature space using 'Holy Severance–Blaze' that was a combination of flame element magic and Holy Severance.

The frost golem's body had shrunk into a third of its original size. Even now, it was dripping with trickles of water. It charged ahead and struck with its halberd several times in the attempt to break the barrier that was sealing itself inside.

With several attacks, cracks entered 'Holy Severance—Blaze' and it was about to collapse, but each time Suzu repaired it so it appeared that it was unable to completely escape right after it attacked.

But it also could be said that there was no problem with Suzu's side who was continuously preserving the barrier.

"Uh, haa haa, just a little more… just a little more…"

Sweat trickled like a waterfall from her forehead. Her breathing was rough. Her eyes were turning blank. She was considerably exhausted by preserving and repairing the advanced barrier continuously. Her two opened iron fans were also trembling, even now it felt like they were going to fall from her hands.

Most likely the firepower was lacking with 'Holy Severance—Blaze'. The idea of melting the golem if she couldn't blow it away in one go, ignoring the bad environment of [Ice and Snow Cavern] that remarkably worsened magic power efficiency of fire element magic by surrounding it with a barrier, was something splendid for a barrier master who really understood her own skill.

What was left was the problem of Suzu's magic power and concentration power against the frost golem's endurance, which one could hold out longer…

"I won't lose. Haa haa, I absolutely won't lose! No matter what I'm told, Suzu will absolutely talk once more with Eriii!"

Right now she was surely hearing the whispering voice. She was rousing up her breaking heart with her war cry. Her blank eyes recovered their shine showing strong will once again. While roughly wiping her sweat with her sleeve, she fired herself up once more.

Looking at such spectacle, Hajime was convinced that if it was Suzu, she would be fine. Surely the experience at Haltina's Great Labyrinth made Suzu a level stronger.

Next, Hajime searched for Ryuutaro's location using the compass. And then he launched the crossbit at the direction it showed. After advancing for a while ahead, it discovered a spot where snow was fiercely blowing in all directions.

In the eyes of Hajime who was watching from the overhead viewpoint in the sky once again, a fiercely mind blowing spectacle flew into his eyes.

"UOOOOOOOOOOOOOOH!!"

"GAAAAAAAAAAH!!"

They were punching each other earnestly from close range without stopping for even a single step back while raising war cries. For some reason, the frost golem didn't carry its halberd and tower shield, if its left cheek got punched, then it would punch the left cheek back. If its right cheek got punched, then it would punch the right cheek back. That kept being repeated back and forth.

It was like two delinquents hitting each other at the riverside. 'Surely a friendship would bud between the frost golem and the muscle head after this, wouldn't it?' That was what Hajime thought with his eyes half-closed. If not for the wounds all over Ryuutaro's body due to the laser and the frost golem's attacks, perhaps he would seriously consider such a possibility to happen.

Rather, think a little about dodging! That was what Hajime couldn't help to retort. Most likely Ryuutaro was thinking, 'Evading the laser while defeating the frost golem is impossible!' right from the start and gave up. 'If that's the case, I just need to defeat it before I get defeated!' must be what he thought then.

"An idiot, an idiot is right here…"

While controlling the crossbit, Hajime couldn't hold back and murmured so.

Hajime explained the situation to Kaori and the others while they looked at him dubiously. Although they looked admiring toward Suzu's current state, the two childhood friends as well as everyone else made an exasperated face towards Ryuutaro's state. Especially Shizuku, who got a headache. She was massaging her forehead due to that.

"Looks like the frost golem is near its limit, so I guess with Sakagami's momentum he will make it somehow… well, Kaori, that's your childhood friend. Do your best."

"… Yes. Ryuutaro-kun too needs to be lectured."

Kaori's eyes weren't smiling at all, which was really terrifying. Hajime didn't think that a muscle head could be cured, but he had to be scolded strictly by all means.

A few minutes later, it seemed that Kouki defeated the frost golem first. He passed through the tunnel of snow veil while using his holy sword as a cane replacement due to the miserable weariness that was the side effect of 'Limit Break'. Next, Suzu cleared her trial and a snow tunnel was opened. Same like Kouki, Suzu was walking with staggering steps where Shizuku rushed to her in a hurry.

And then, Ryuutaro who defeated the frost golem last… alone, he passed out and sunk into his puddle of blood with a satisfied face. He didn't enter the snow tunnel, so the laser was approaching at him mercilessly.

"Wawa-, Ryuutaro-kun!"

Kaori rushed out in a great panic. Hajime heaved a deep sigh while covering the crossbit lying in wait with 'Vajra', blocking that laser. Looking at Ryuutaro's carefree fainted face, a light killing intent welled up from him. Just when he was aiming his gun muzzle while half seriously thinking whether he should just blow his face with a shotgun like this, Kaori reached Ryuutaro first and Hajime barely gave up his thinking.

Kaori grabbed Ryuutaro's leg and dragged him while dashing through the tunnel. It seemed she was applying healing simultaneously while advancing, but the back of Ryuutaro's head bumped *gon gon* with the ground and kept tumbling. Honestly, that treatment was just terrible.

Perhaps because all the members had passed through the snow veil and gathered in front of the gate, the sun shining over their head suddenly vanished. At the same time the laser stopped and the snow veil once more rose in to the sky and the field of vision cleared up. And then the gigantic gate that should become the entrance shined brilliantly as though informing them of clearing the trial. It didn't open, but began to form a membrane of light.

"Looks like, this membrane of light is turning into the entrance."

"… It resembled a gate. A teleport entrance?"

"I don't really feel a good feeling."

"Shia. There is no way a trial in a great labyrinth will give a good feeling, right?"

"Ahaha. Certainly. The mind attack is not really a problem, but there is nothing more irritating than this. Ao I want to be spared from anything more than this, though… surely, my wish won't get granted isn't it… haah."

Shia's rabbit ears dropped down gloomily. If it was a physical attack, it wouldn't be a threat for Shia who had been remarkably turned into a bugged character, but a mental attack that bit by bit interfered with the subconscious territory felt irritating like a small bone that got stuck in the throat even though it wouldn't kill you. It was steadily getting under her skin.

By the way as for Tio… it was fine to not pay her any mind.

"Kouki-kun and Suzu-chan too, gather over here! I will heal you two all at once."

Kaori called at Kouki and Suzu who reached in front of the entrance with staggered steps just sat down heavily as though expressing their extreme fatigue. The figure of Kouki that was crawling to her wordlessly was quite eerie. As for Suzu, for some reason, Shizuku carried her in a princess carry that made her shy.

"… Nagumo… my attack was… my bad."

Kouki murmured intermittently with a dark atmosphere while being wrapped in light of healing.

“I told you already you don’t need to feel reserved. Even though it would be better if you just go all out from the start if that was too much trouble for you.”

“… I guess. Even though my ‘Divine Might’ should have come at you, there is not a single speck of dust on you. No matter what I do, I cannot even give you a scratch. That’s why I…”

“Kouki, are you okay? You feel strange for some reason. Is the side effect of the ‘Limit Break’ that hard on you? Want to lie down a little?”

“…”

With a dark look, Kouki spilled out self-derisive words toward Hajime who was not only unharmed but even looked spotless without any trace of fatigue. Shizuku addressed such a Kouki with a worried tone. She would even lend him her lap if he wanted to lie down. She was tapping her lap to show that.

However, Kouki himself only glanced at such a Shizuku with a scared look for an instant before he averted his gaze immediately. He shook his head conveying his anxiety. After that, he closed his eyes. But just before his eyes closed, the gaze that he sent at Hajime… it was only Hajime who noticed the hatred which dyed that gaze, but that was just his feeling…

“What a troublesome concept…”

Hajime unconsciously floated a wry smile.

A while after that, the healing of every member was finished to a certain degree, so they headed toward the entrance of light. They couldn’t wait for full recovery, but even so compared to having their mind continuously eroded by the whispering voice inside this labyrinth, they decided it was better to progress.

“Now then, let’s go.”

Along with Hajime’s words, all members leaped into the gate of light.

When the brightness that dyed their field of vision settled, Hajime slowly opened his eyes.

“… So we got divided. Well, it’s within expectation.”

Hajime whispered while scowling with an air as though he was going to click his tongue at any moment. None of his companions were around him. He was alone.

When his gaze wandered around, it looked like Hajime was in a narrow passage. Inside that two-meter passage were more mirrors in four directions like a mirror house. His figure was reflected at his left and right up and down. Even when he turned to look back there was only a wall. There was not a single thing that seemed to be an entrance. It was a place where he could only advance forward.

Most likely, Yue and others were also sent to a similar passage like this by themselves alone. Hajime advanced ahead with that assumption.

The sound of his footsteps walking on the mirror-like ice reverberated.

It was perhaps after around ten minutes of walking. He walked without stopping on a straight path without any branching. Before long, Hajime arrived at a large room with a huge pillar that connected the

ceiling and the floor in the center. Similar to the mirror-like ice wall, the round ice pillar also reflected Hajime nicely.

“There is no other passage… that means, that ice pillar is…”

While talking to himself like that, Hajime walked closer toward the ice pillar. Its diameter was large, so Hajime’s reflection on it wasn’t distorted even when he was right in front of it, it was like one more Hajime had come from the world inside the mirror. The more Hajime approached, the larger the figure got.

Finally, Hajime approached to the distance where he could touch the ice pillar. He looked fixedly at his image reflected in the ice pillar. White hair and eye patch, wearing a black coat with one artificial hand… as always, it was a splendid chuunibyou style. Hajime fell on his knees.

“… Damn it. Recently I have never looked at mirror clearly so… what a shock…”

Hajime was on all fours with his head hanging down. Actually, he didn’t really look at the mirror on a routine basis, so he received quite some damage from looking at his own appearance thoroughly after so long. The black history sealed at the bottom of his heart “You calling?” peeked out its face. By the way, things like his bed hair or the like were handled by Yue every time. It seemed that she liked to tamper with Hajime.

“Indeed, this is just like what the whispering voice was saying, perhaps there is no place to belong for me in Japan…”

Surely what the whispering voice wanted to say wasn’t something like that. This was a terrible misunderstanding. (EN: The voice was saying he could never return to Japan because his strength and magic made him barely human, while he personally is bothered more by the fact he looks chuunibyou.)

As though to express that, suddenly, a voice that he was already familiar with resounded.

{That’s not what it means you know?}

“… As expected it comes out, huh.”

Hajime’s eyes quietly squinted, and he raised his head from his ‘orz’ posture. Thereupon, he caught the figure of himself in front of him glaring down.

Correct, regardless of Hajime’s ‘orz’ posture, the Hajime that was reflected in the ice pillar was standing.

{Hou, as expected, you are not agitated, eh? I am just as expected?}

“Yeah, of course, isn’t it? I have mostly guessed the concept of this great labyrinth. On top of that, if I take Amanogawa’s testimony into account, I thought that sooner or later this kind of situation will come up.”

Looking at Hajime, whose agitation was nonexistence even though the one inside the mirror was talking to him, the Hajime inside the mirror made a wide smirk.

{By the way, what’s this concept?}

“You are me, right? Then, you should understand even without asking.”

{No no, certainly I am you, but not entirely. You have also predicted that, right?}

Hajime nodded “Indeed”. In his assumption, the Hajime inside the mirror was something similar like to the fake created in Haltina’s Great Labyrinth, so he thought that this was something prepared by reading the information of the real thing to make this look-alike, and it seemed that this assumption was correct.

What the fake was saying by ‘not entirely’ was that until the end, the Hajime inside the ice pillar was a trial of the great labyrinth. Then it was understandable that it was trying to verify his answer.

“… The concept of this labyrinth is ‘to win against yourself’ right? The negative part of oneself, the dirty part that you averted your eyes from, the inconvenient part, contradiction… can you overcome that kind of thing or not? Most likely, this is a trial so we won’t be taken advantage of by god, I guess.”

{As expected of me. That’s right, it’s exactly as you said.}

The Hajime inside the mirror clapped his hands in a fake gesture. In regard to that, Hajime got irritated thinking ‘What an irritating face’. It was a complete boomerang for him.

But that irritating face changed at the same time the clapping stopped. Those eyes began to emit reddish black light, the fake’s whole body began to be dyed with black that was blacker than even black. The white hair returned to his original black color, the skin that was tanned under the sun became even darker. Even the colors of the clothes were all changing into a jet black tone. Its whole body was really pitch black.

Hajime was about to take a step back full of vigilance to create some distance, and it was at that moment…

DOPAN-!

DOPAN-!

Without showing the hand movement, there wasn’t even killing intent. With an extremely natural motion, shots were fired.

At the same time when the black haired Hajime pulled the trigger of a completely black Donner, a bullet really flew out from inside the mirror. The railgun emitted a muddy black spark. What intercepted it was a vivid red flash.

Hajime was taking a ‘drawing back’ action with a single step back while he was commencing a merciless attack. The bullet fired with an extremely natural motion clashed with the fast approaching black flash like some kind of joke, both crushed each other and fell on the ground.

It was something terrifying for an actual attack to come out from inside the mirror, but even more than that, what was the most terrifying was how both of them naturally fired lethal attacks without killing intent.

{Haha, as expected you get it. What’s the timing, how do I think, what kind of technique would you use to slaughter the enemy…”

The black Hajime stepped out from the mirror world while smirking widely. He materialized into the real world smoothly from the rippling ice pillar. And then he drew out Schlag with left artificial arm similar to Hajime's and took a stance along with Donner at the right hand. That was exactly the stance of Hajime's self-taught gun-kata.

Hajime silently took the same stance. The white-haired Hajime and the black-haired Hajime began to emit absurd killing intent in the same stance like mirror reflections. That immense pressure was really equal. It seemed that Hajime's ability and the weapons in his possession, everything was reproduced.

If it was normal people, just by being at the side of the two of them might make someone go mad, inside such pressure the black Hajime grinned while announcing the signal of the trial's start.

{Now, Nagumo Hajime. Can you, win against me?}

Right after that, there was a sublime tremendous roar as though space itself was creaking.

That was simply the sound of the two stepping in as well as the sound of a simultaneous bombardment from the crossbits they took out at the same time, and the explosive sound of the spinning kick they each launched while pretending to shoot.

Hajime's body, which was almost blown away immediately, forcefully stopped in place using the spike transmuted on the sole of his shoe and he aimed Donner. That gun muzzle made a blunt sound of metal striking metal… when he looked, the black Hajime also aimed Donner with exactly the same motion. Both of the gun muzzles locked each other without even a millimeter of disorder.

"Die."

{Die.}

Without hesitation, both of them pulled the trigger of Donner while ordering the other to die. Violent sound roared, each Donner repelled each other with fierce momentum. But, in the next instant both Schlags that had been prepared through their armpit spouted fire.

The red flash that was launched from super close range clashed from the front right at the middle of the two. Both bullets were squashed against each other and generated shockwave. Before the two crushed bullets fell on the ground, the two Hajime used that shockwave and rotated their body to launch an upper kick along with strong wind.

GAN-! A shockwave sound that was like a joke that couldn't be thought of coming from the clash of flesh bodies. Immediately after, the kick changed the angle and deftly changed into a middle kick.

Once again, the shockwave of clashing metal resounded. At that moment, Hajime's Donner aimed at the head of the black Hajime and the trigger was pulled. The black Hajime warded off Hajime's Donner the instant the trigger was pulled and at the same time the black Schlag aimed at Hajime's head and fired.

And as expected, Hajime averted the line of fire using the barrel of Schlag to ward off the opponent's hand. Without paying any mind to the black flash that grazed his head, Hajime pulled back Donner that fired first and then fired consecutively at the black Hajime to arrest his movement, but that too was averted by the black Hajime's elbow strike.

While dodging the firing line of the opponent with the paper thin difference in close range, they tried to take the instant opening. Black and red flashes couldn't catch the opponent and passed through empty air. Even the attack from blind spots through the crossbit was neutralized by the black crossbit and resulted in nothing.

{How strong. Really strong. It's really not a strength that a human can have. Right, me?}

"Aaa?"

From two Donner that were swung in pretension of shooting, 'Wind Claw' stretched out and shallowly cut the cheek of each other. From the gap of the fresh blood scattering once more, the grinning face of the black Hajime peeked out.

{Monstrous power, hands dirtied in blood, heart that doesn't hesitate in killing… what are my parents going to think to look at the current you?}

"… What do you want to say?"

Reloading while performing a gun spin, Hajime tried to break the foothold with 'Transmutation' until the time to fire the next shot. At the same time the red spark traveled the ground, black spark ran and blocked the 'Transmutation' as though it was understood from the beginning.

{I want to go back home. That is the wish in my core of being but… are you thinking that there is a place for you to belong there?}

"…"

{In that world, especially in the country called Japan, killing people is not tolerated yeah? To say nothing of monster, just who can accept someone like that? Tou-san and Kaa-san? Just when they think that their son who was missing is finally coming home, that son has turned into a man-killing monster. Ku-ku-ku-, surely they will be shocked. 'Is this really our son?' They are going to think like that.}

Hajime who kept silent and expressionless took out a large amount of grenades from his 'Treasure Warehouse', he ignited them using the spark of 'Lightning Clad' and scattered it on the ground. Against the suicide attack, the black Hajime grinned and invoked the same 'Vajra' like Hajime.

Right after that, a tremendous explosion occurred between the two from super close range. From inside the explosion flame *BOBA-!* Hajime and black Hajime flew out with such a sound. At the same time, both of them took out Orkan and fired all twelve bullets. Although the trajectory of the bullet was straight, the rocket bullet that had no relation with precise aiming, unlike the gun bullet, trailed sparks behind them attacking the target even while half their numbers were neutralizing each other.

Those surviving rockets were sniped by the railgun from both sides.

{Actually you are scared, right? The place for you to go home has been gone since a long time ago! That you will be absolutely rejected, in your original world, in your own family! You are scared right!?}

"Just keep talking."

Like a stage actor, the black Hajime talked vehemently with both his arms spread widely while still carrying Donner and Orkan. The real Hajime scowled and threw out a chakram.

{That's why you couldn't ignore the words of Hatayama Aiko. She pointed out your way of living after going home and put discord in your heart. You look up at Hatayama Aiko as your 'teacher' because she gave you an answer, even if it's a trivial one for the doubt smoldering deep in your heart. Isn't that right!?}

"…"

The black Hajime similarly took out a chakram, and both artifacts clashed in midair, they neutralized each other really simply. Furthermore, just like Hajime, the black Hajime also shoot into the chakrams at hand and exchanged shot against the space-leap bullet from the opposite chakram flying in the air.

Continuing after that with a composed attitude, he continued his words that were making fun of Hajime.

"But, even if you are not living in 'a lonely way', it doesn't change the fact that you are a blood-soaked monster. Both that world and your family won't accept you! That time when your first killed a human, it wasn't that you didn't feel anything. Even if you didn't feel guilt, you felt fear. You just didn't realize that your feeling was paralyzed, from the depth of your heart, you fear being disconnected from the 'Nagumo Hajime your parents know'!"

Hajime frowned and his reaction was slightly late. The black flash flying out from chakram shallowly gouged Hajime's right shoulder. It was a small wound. It wasn't anything big. But since the battle started, this was the first time it was just Hajime who got wounded.

Looking at that, the black Hajime grinned widely. Without stopping, he continued to pull the trigger of words for follow up.

{It's great that there is Yue ehhh, me. As long as I just have Yue… saying that even if you rejected anything else you can just cling at her huh?}

The wound on Hajime's shoulder shined while it was healing little by little. That was the effect of the artifact Hajime made with regeneration magic set in it. It intermittently regenerated himself like auto-regen. It didn't have that much effect because in the end, the regeneration was attached into ore. The object that could be made to regenerate was also mainly ore in the end. Regeneration of the flesh was nothing more than a secondary effect.

But the black Hajime didn't have the intention to allow even that slight regeneration. With fierce momentum, black Hajime stepped in close at Hajime and persistently aimed at the small earring that had regeneration magic concentrated so much on it that it had the effect to regenerate the flesh.

Once a more violent offense and the defense were unfolding in super close range.

{But, that is merely dependence. The majority of what you mistakenly think as love is just a sense of security. That's only insurance when you get rejected. Recently, your insurance is increasing eh!?}

The wish to return home, the love to Yue——the black Hajime mercilessly hacked the feeling that built the core of Hajime with a knife, while grinning triumphantly, the black Hajime was trying to expose every feeling of Hajime and throw it into a sea of malice.

But, those words became forcefully shut up by the red flash that grazed the cheek. Yes, that wound was inflicted only to the black Hajime. The black Hajime reflexively gazed in wonder, during that time Hajime slip through the distance and the elbow of the artificial arm of Hajime struck.

{Gofuh!?}

Immediately after, bursting slug bullet was fired from the elbow, the black Hajime has grandly blown away with scattered shockwave.

It was just like an elbow strike of Chinese kenpo, Hajime who was in continued alertness in that pose returned his stance and tapped Donner on his shoulder with a vein throbbing on his head.

“Although it can’t be helped because this is a trial, but you talk too much in the middle of mortal combat. If you got the time to have a tedious talk, you better use it to think of a killing method even for just one more moment. You really are unlike me.”

Implicitly Hajime was saying that ‘after all you are just a fake’, he was looking with a cold gaze.

Ahead of his gaze, was the figure of the black Hajime who was pressing on his stomach with a bewildered expression even while he was already standing up. He could block it to a certain degree with ‘Vajra’, but even so, he was hit with bursting slug bullet from zero distance. As expected he couldn’t escape from it unharmed.

{I thought you got shaken but… My words are your heart. You should understand that I’m not talking randomly here.}

“I guess. Really those were words that made my ears hurt. Having the feeling deep inside myself exposed like that, is painful just like having a note where I wrote out my black history get read loudly.”

Hajime’s reaction that seemed like joking around made black Hajime frowned seeing that his words only gave that much damage mentally.

{Then, why… }

“That’s obvious. I am aware of something like that myself even without anyone telling me.”

{You are aware?}

“Yeah, that’s right. Indeed, even while I’m wishing from the bottom of my heart to return home, I’m also scared to the same degree. That sensei’s words became one of my salvation is correct, yet about those words aren’t something that softened my fear is also true. And then, even when in the end it doesn’t go like I want it, I have Yue… true, it’s correct that I’m also thinking like that.”

{Then, why aren’t you shaken? Human is an organism that cannot look directly at one’s own ugliness and dirty part. If those parts are exposed mercilessly, they will close their eyes so hard, plugged their ears, crouched down and stay unmoving there, even so, if they are made to face it forcefully they will break, that’s the kind of organism they are.}

Hajime listened to the words of the black Hajime and leaked out a chuckle. He then settled his laugh seeing the black Hajime making a dubious face at him and shrugged his shoulder.

“The part where you’re ‘not entirely’ me is coming out a lot, huh? That way of talking is too serious as me you know?”

{… }

“Well, listen up. Why am I not shaken, you ask? That’s because thinking of that kind of thing is meaningless, isn’t that obvious?”

{Meaningless?}

“Certainly, there is the possibility I’ll get rejected, that is something terrifying, but that’s only something in the future, right? There won’t be any answer even if I think about it right now. It’s pointless just thinking about it. Then, I can only keep holding that fear and try to clash against it. You see, I already decided to go home. No matter what kind of circumstance anyone has, even if I myself am scared, I won’t mind those trivial things and go home. I decided so, now I’ll force my way through. That’s all.”

Calm eyes like a peaceful water surface. Hajime understood everything, yet he still declared that he would persist in his own will. Even though he was not using ‘Coercion’ or ‘Magic Power Emission’, for some reason it felt like he was emitting a pressure that was far more severe, the black Hajime unconsciously took a step back.

{… Isn’t that just being defiant?}

“Haha, certainly you can say it like that. Yeah, but, I’ll have you correct one thing.”

While making a wry smile after being overpowered, the black Hajime talked back as though in revenge. Hajime too returned a wry smile. However, right after that, Hajime made a sullen face and demanded a correction of black Hajime’s remark. Toward the black Hajime who was tilting his head, Hajime made a posture and strongly complained.

“It’s not the majority. At best it’s only 0.1 percent.”

{What?}

“My feeling toward Yue that she is my insurance is just 0.1 percent from the whole. The rest 99.9 percent is love.”

It was also correct that deep in Hajime’s mind there was also a part of him that was thinking of Yue like that. But, Hajime confirmed that feeling of his. He wouldn’t avert his eyes from Yue because of guilty feelings. Rather, he had the confidence that he could say to Yue right from the front something that was relatively pathetic like, ‘I’m scared of being rejected in my homeland, so comfort me with Yue’s presence’.

That was because he understood that his existence wasn’t perfect, therefore he would rely on his beloved partner for the part he was lacking at or his ugly part. In certain meaning, it was something that brought about an immense trust. If it was Yue, he could even say something spoiled like that from his mouth, it could even be looked at as speaking fondly of a loved one.

The black Hajime that was hit with such sweet emotions of love emitted together with Hajime words was…

{… At the very least say that it's ten percent.}

Even though the black Hajime should be Hajime itself, he was making an exasperated face. Surely that was the reaction of the part that was not Hajime which was planted in it to function as a test of the great labyrinth. Truly what an impolite fellow, to mistakenly read the love of Hajime toward Yue like this.

Hajime ignored that black Hajime and stepped in all of a sudden. Their respective Donner and Schlag rushed about in super close range at all directions.

As always it was an offense and defense that rivaled each other like a mirror. But, that equilibrium was gradually beginning to crumble. The red flash Hajime fired, his kick, crossbit, chakram, the built-in weapon of the artificial arm, all of those began to catch the black Hajime.

{Guh, what's going on… even though there is no sign I'm getting weakened-}

"Hm? Weakened?"

{-, this is a trial to surpass oneself. The more you overcome the negative emotion you harbor, I who am the negative image will be weakening. Conversely, the more you avert your eyes, the stronger I become.}

"Hah, so there is that kind of rule."

Finally, Hajime's Donner blasted away the black Schlag. It fell on the ground and rolled far away while rotating all over. Giving it a glance, Hajime's Schlag thrust at an opening and gouged the flank of the black Hajime.

Unable to endure that, the black Hajime stumbled while withdrawing back.

{But, you are not conquering your negative emotion. You are just merely putting off the problem and getting defiant. The proof of that is how I'm not weakening… yet, why are you surpassing me-! Even though I am you-!}

"More accurately, you are just me when we first faced each other, right?"

{What are you-, -, talking about-!}

Even more, the black Donner was pulverized together with the right arm of the black Hajime. He fired the shotgun in the artificial arm, but Hajime easily dodged and fired his railgun into the elbow joint while they passed each other, destroying it.

The two Hajime took distance and faced each other once more. However, the black one was already full of wound all over his body. His gaze was filled with doubt.

"You don't get it? A false image of you is made from the information that was read from me. That is likely the information from when I entered the labyrinth until I arrived in front of the ice pillar in this room. In other words, you are nothing more than me of dozens of minutes before. Then, right now, in this battle, I just need to be stronger than me of dozens of minutes ago. That's all."

{Impossible… something like that}

“If you are me, then don’t deny me. Discovering means of survival in the middle of mortal combat. Even if it’s just a fraction stronger, just a fraction of a second faster, just a single more drop of magic power, just predicting half a step further, if I can surpass the opponent just by that much I can survive. All this time, I have come this far by getting the better of mortal combat in that way. Isn’t that right?”

The black Hajime that got taken aback for a while relaxed his shoulders after a second. And then he made a wry smile while gathering the crossbits at his surrounding and took the stance of bare-handed fighting.

{Certainly, that’s true… good grief, so there is a guy that’ll breakthrough this trial not by ‘overcoming’ but by being ‘defiant’. Even though if you just get agitated, then there will be a chance of victory for me still.}

“Don’t say something stupid. Since the beginning, you haven’t got any chance of victory. A false image is after all just a false image. I’m going to smash up that irritating face.”

{That’s masochism you know?}

Immediately after that, just like at the beginning of the battle, a thunderous roar rang out. But, the result was strikingly apparent.

The lower body of the black Hajime has blown away, he collapsed while flickering like heat haze, vanishing away. There was no more word, however, that expression looked satisfied somehow.

Hajime who breathed out deeply dispelled his continued alertness… for now he gave the final blow off three bullets at the head of the vanishing black Hajime. The twitching black Hajime became a pale light for sure this time and vanished. At the end, ‘Read the mood, you damn bastard.’ It felt like he heard something like that, but that was surely just his imagination, no doubt of that.

Hajime stored Donner in his holster, at the same time a part of the room’s wall suddenly melted, there a passage appeared.

“Yue and others are… well, they must be fine.”

Along with that murmur, Hajime advanced into the passage.

By the way, whether Kouki and company were included in that ‘they must be fine’… it could be easily guessed.

Chapter 143 – Shizuku’s True Feelings

The fierce sound of clashing blades resounded through the large space where a huge round ice pillar was standing at the center.

“HAAAAAAH!”

{Oh, your swordsmanship is disarrayed again, you know?}

Along with spirit-filled war cry, she unleashed a quick god-like sword draw. Several streaks of black lines drew through the air in an instant, but not a single one of those sharp sword flashes reached the opponent.

Instead, the opponent who mocked her swordsmanship nearly struck her in the forehead with a weaving thrust. She somehow avoided it by twisting her head, but a shallow cut was left on her temple.

"-, 'Scorching Wave'!"

The thrust that almost hit her before was one of Yaegashi's own techniques. Therefore, Shizuku understood better than anyone that the thrust consisted of three stages. Her temple was cut, and it was difficult to evade with her slightly disarrayed posture.

Before the approaching flash of the second thrust could gouge her, Shizuku pushed her sheath on the ground and scattered the shockwave. The ice shards of the smashed ground changed into improvised buckshot and she somehow escaped from range.

{It's great that you have the present from him, isn't it? If you didn't have that, you would have been dead against me since some time ago, wouldn't you?}

"Haa haa…"

Against the white Shizuku who was sheathing her white katana while teasing her, the black ponytailed Shizuku kept silent while her shoulders heaved.

Currently, Shizuku was fighting her false image much like Hajime had.

The false image she faced was different with Hajime's in that it was really white. White hair in a ponytail and skin that was like white porcelain. Her blade and clothes were also all white. Her piercing reddish black eyes were awfully eye-catching.

That white Shizuku opened her mouth while showing a sarcastic expression and wearing a wide grin that was unimaginable coming from the usual Shizuku. It had been like this since a while ago. The content of her speech was naturally the exposition of Shizuku's negative emotions.

{It hurts? Painful? Scary? Do you want to cry? You don't need to hide it, you know? I am you, so I understand everything. Yes, everything.}

It had been fifteen minutes since the battle began. During that time, Shizuku's blade didn't strike once. The white Shizuku still looked clean.

In contrast, although she barely evaded a fatal wound just now, Shizuku had shallow cuts all over her body. She was soaked wet with sweat and blood. Even now, the blood flowing from her temple and cheek was trickling down drop by drop from her slender chin.

{Actually, I didn't want to do something like learning the sword. Rather than wearing Japanese clothes or a dojo uniform, I wanted to wear cute and frilly western clothes. Rather than carrying a bamboo sword, dolls and glittery accessories are far better.}

"… Shut up."

The first time Shizuku was guided by her grandfather to swing a bamboo sword was when she was four years old. Her grandfather was the head of the Yaegashi family and inheritor of ancient sword style, Yeagashi-style. Surely, he made Shizuku swing the bamboo sword only for fun. But, of all the things to happen, the four-year-old Shizuku displayed a glimpse of her talent.

The grandfather who realized that her cute granddaughter inherited a talent for the style broke out from his usual sour look. Even now, Shizuku clearly remembered how happy her grandfather's smile was.

Since that day, sword art and kendo practice became a part of Shizuku's life. Her grandfather, her father, and everyone in the dojo too, all of them praised how amazing she was…

But, actually…

{That time when Kouki entered the dojo, I thought that a prince had finally arrived. 'I will protect Shizuku-chan too', I think? I dreamed of a cool boy that would say that to me like in a picture book story. If it's him, then he can make me a girl. He will protect me. He will spoil me. I was thinking that. But, you see?}

"Shut up."

While clenching her teeth hard, Shizuku's figure turned hazy using 'No Beat', stepping in with god speed and drawing her sword. A flash of space ruptured – 'Flash Blossom' drew its track through space itself to bisect the white Shizuku, but a white track that drew exactly the same trajectory perfectly neutralized it.

Not giving up, Shizuku further unleashed her slashes, but everything was evaded, blocked, and her opponent didn't miss an opening to increase Shizuku's wounds.

{What Kouki brought about was only jealousy toward you. Isn't that right? Kouki was overflowing with a sense of justice and kindness since elementary school. He did everything skillfully and became the target of all of the girls' attention. You who swung bamboo sword even though you are female, your short hair, your plain clothes, you who couldn't talk about girly topics, by being at the side of such a Kouki made the girls unable to tolerate it. Yes, yes, even now I remember those words. The words said to me by one of the girls who liked Kouki. 'You are a girl?' she said. That was shocking, right?}

"Just shut your mouth!"

The bitter memory from elementary school revived in the back of Shizuku's brain. At that period, her hair was cut short to practice the sword. A lot of her clothes were also plain. Her beauty over cuteness was certainly weakened related to girlishness.

With such a Shizuku, there was no way the girls would stay quiet if she was together with Kouki, who was popular since he was elementary school student. Shizuku received the jealousy of other children who didn't know mercy and moderation due to their young age. Even among those, those words were something she couldn't forget even now. Putting aside her external appearance and her sword skill, Shizuku's inside was exactly a girl. For such a Shizuku, those words were a large bitter shock.

Once, she had asked for help from Kouki. But, at that kind of time it was settled what Kouki was going to say. He would say, "Surely, they didn't mean any ill will", "Everyone is a good kid, you know?", "They will understand if you talk to them", etc, etc. Exactly like those words, Kouki spoke with the girls about their attitude towards Shizuku. It went without saying that the harsh treatment towards Shizuku got stronger. Furthermore, the concealment so that Kouki wouldn't realize such things happened increased all the more.

Even when Shizuku consulted Kouki, what Kouki returned to her was only a troubled smile. Before she knew it, Shizuku stopped relying on Kouki.

Such a living continued throughout her period of elementary school. If she didn't meet Kaori, who stayed by her side when she entered middle school, perhaps her heart would have broken and she would have abandoned everything.

{Even though I actually hated it, it was scary to betray my family's expectation and I couldn't stop learning the sword. Even though Kouki was the cause, I couldn't distance myself to push my childhood friend who didn't have a single speck of ill will because of my guilt… truly, you are an indecisive and half-baked girl.}

"-such a thing-!?"

The sword of the white Shizuku severed gravity using 'Multi Flash' and brought Shizuku a moment of weightlessness and suspension. At that moment, the sheath the white Shizuku was holding was swung horizontally. Along with that, 'Scorching Wave' was also invoked. White ripples of magic power spread. An impact with pain enough to almost blow away Shizuku's consciousness attacked her exposed defenseless side. Her body was blown away grandly.

Shizuku bounced several times on the ground before she somehow came to a stop while sliding on the floor.

"Gohoh, gehoh."

Blood was spat out in a splatter from her coughing mouth. She felt intense pain from her ribs. Two or three of her bones had obviously been broken. It seemed that the impact injured her internal organs. In some way or another, she fastened her consciousness that was departing to the beyond.

Brisk footsteps resounded toward Shizuku, who couldn't immediately stand up. It was just like a countdown that notified her of approaching death. Impatience floated across Shizuku's expression while she struggled to stand up desperately.

The white Shizuku sweetly whispered to that agonized Shizuku with a kind tone, her mouth splitting open like a crescent moon. She was like a demon.

{It's fine even if you don't stand up anymore, you know? Someone else will clear this labyrinth even without you suffering like this. If you do that, you can go home. It's fine. Even if you give up here, I won't take your life. If you sleep just like this, by the time you wake up, everything will be over.}

"What, are you…"

{Just giving a choice… Of course, if you don't give up, I'll kill you. I'll slice you apart without mercy.}

The white Shizuku's wide grin could make somebody tremble in fear. The naked white blade in her hand was sticky with the proof of how it had shredded Shizuku. The blood trickling through it looked as though it was flowing through white snow. From the tip that was pointed at Shizuku for show, drop by drop of her own blood dripped down. Looking at that scene, the crouching Shizuku's expression turned pale.

But, the next moment *KI-!* Shizuku glared back at her false image without paying attention to the blood spurting from her wounds. She began to fill her limbs with strength.

“Guh, uaAAAAH!!”

{… I see. That’s right, isn’t it? If it’s you, then you will stand up, isn’t it?}

The white Shizuku nodded once, her eyes narrowed quietly, and she swung down the thin white blade. It was blocked by Shizuku’s black blade while she was on her knees raising a war cry.

Simultaneously,

“Fly, ‘Far Sky’!!”

By using a skill for the sake of pulling things apart, Shizuku somehow blew away the white Shizuku and bought some distance. The white Shizuku twirled in the air and landed gracefully on the ground with a somersault like a cat. Shizuku stood up while giving it a glance.

“You are annoying, yapping like that. You just keep saying incomprehensible things. I won’t accompany you in such a psychological battle.”

{Psychological battle, huh? So you won’t acknowledge your own feelings until the end. Until this year, you kept being stubborn like that. You made your surrounding stay quiet by your strength, constantly paying attention to someone… so that you aren’t even aware that you are actually wishing to lean on someone…}

“Do you not hear I’m saying that you are noisy!?”

Shizuku charged without even a little of her usual calmness. There was no tactic or anything. She was merely swinging her sword unsightly through the air with reckless swordsmanship. Her feeling of wanting to shut up the opponent was clear to see.

The false image was created by reading the negative emotion of the target and using that as the base. And then if the exposed emotion wasn’t accepted by the target, the false image’s strength would rise without end. In reverse, if the target accepted her own fault then the false image would be weakened… but the current Shizuku was in the former state.

Therefore, with her heart disarrayed, Shizuku’s sword attack was already like child’s play against the white Shizuku, whose strength increased.

The white Shizuku lightly handled the full might of Shizuku’s technique and beat her down in reverse with a polished sword technique. The injury on Shizuku’s flank, the damage to her internal organs, and the blood loss made Shizuku’s movement dull, causing her injuries to increase further. That turned into impatience which made her grow violent and made her movement even duller. It was a vicious cycle.

To add insult to injury against such a Shizuku, the white Shizuku opened her mouth with a laugh.

{That time when you arrived in this world you were also like that, right? In truth, you were full of anxiety. You were scared from the bottom of your heart when you were Ishtar told you about the subjugation of the devil race. The night when you first killed a monster, you cried in a place where no

one could know it. The feeling of cutting flesh wouldn't disappear. The blood clinging to your skin felt like it wouldn't go away. You were hiding many times trying to wash it off, weren't you?}

"Haaa-!!"

Shizuku tried to drown the words of the false image with her spirited yell. But, that act itself expressed Shizuku's denial, because she couldn't accept it, the difference in strength between them opened even farther.

{That time when Nagumo-kun fell into the abyss, if you didn't pour all your strength into consoling the deranged Kaori, surely, the one who would be crushed by terror would be you. Since that day, when you felt a real death, all the time, toward the terror of death, toward the terror of killing… you continued to be afraid.}

"Aguh!?"

The white Shizuku's 'Lightning Blossom' burst, paralyzed Shizuku's body. Taking that opening, a white flash caressed Shizuku's neck. *pushu-!* With that sound, fresh blood scattered out.

Thanks to Shizuku enfolding herself in 'Scorching Wave' and blowing away their bodies to open a distance, she managed to barely dodge a fatal wound. But blood was flowing like a river from between Shizuku's fingers pressed against her neck. Her carotid artery wasn't cut, but even so, it was a wound on her neck. The bleeding was quite a lot.

A clear vision of death floated in her brain. An overwhelming terror and despair began to assault Shizuku's heart. The emotion that she desperately suppressed leaked out and her hand that was holding the black katana was clattering.

The white Shizuku's lips that looked excessively red split open widely. Sticky words flowed out like a muddy stream.

{Hey, you. You were happy at that time, weren't you?}

"Eh?"

That sudden question made Shizuku leak out a dumbfounded voice while still pressing on her neck.

{I'm talking about that time Nagumo-kun came to save your class. You understand, right? There is no way you can forget that most dramatic moment in your life.}

"What are you saying…"

{A life threatening and despairing pinch… no? At that time, you had given up for certain. You were going to accept the unreasonable death and gave up everything. You didn't believe that anyone would come saving you gallantly in this world… Because of that, that red radiance, that large back, that overwhelming power without any match, it stole your heart.}

"Yo, you're wro-…"

If felt like something that she didn't want to recognize by any means, that she mustn't recognize no matter what was going to be said. Shizuku immediately tried to yell words of rejection. But, as though to tell her that such resistance was pointless, the white Shizuku mercilessly declared.

{That time when Kaori was killed was also like that. If you aren't aware yourself, then I'll say it. At that time, for the first time since you came to this world, you 'clung'. You clung to Nagumo-kun. To such a you, he said 'believe me and wait'. And then he really answered your expectation. Just like you believed, he saved your best friend along with your heart. Since that day, you kept desperately averting your eyes, but… now, you won't be able to lie to yourself anymore.}

"Stop it, you are wrong. I'm…"

Toward Shizuku, who was shaking her head like a kid refusing something, the false image thrust the truth that she couldn't possibly escape from.

{You————love Nagumo-kun.}

"…"

Shizuku's throat was clogged. Her head was still shaking left and right in denial. She didn't even have the composure to be bothered by the blood flowing from her cut neck.

The reason was because that was an emotion that she absolutely mustn't recognize. Because that was an unforgivable feeling, a proof of the worst betrayal.

Toward Shizuku, whose mind had been cornered so much that she didn't even have the leeway to say a word of denial, the false image gently sent her the finishing blow. It was as though she was sending her a flower for the departed.

{Geez you, to fall in love with the beloved person of your best friend ——This traitor.}

"…"

Shizuku's knees lost strength. She only just supported herself enough with the black katana that she didn't fall on her knees, but the light of determination was disappearing from her eyes.

The words thrust into her heart… were just that severe.

It was really hard to control this thing called a heart. It was not an exaggeration to call a person who could perfectly control their own heart as abnormal. It was the same with the feeling of liking another person, something that couldn't be explained with logic. That was why, even if Shizuku fell in love with Hajime just like Kaori, it was an exaggeration to call her a betrayer just from having that feeling.

But, the white Shizuku——Shizuku's negative emotion, the depth of her heart, her own feeling stated that she was a 'betrayer'.

Perhaps, that originated from the honesty that Shizuku had by nature, and her undying gratitude and good will toward her most important best friend who she snuggled up to at her most bitter period.

Her feelings for her treasured Kaori were too strong that she couldn't forgive herself just by liking Hajime. Not to mention the various faces she showed to Hajime from her uncontrollable emotion. The

smiling face from her heart, her clingy and miserable face, her charming face watching in a daze, her sulky face, and even her relieved sleeping face… all those happening in a place where Kaori didn't know. Such a thing was also a reason that spurred her guilty feeling.

{Furthermore, you attacked Shia, didn't you? Why was that, I wonder? Why it wasn't Yue or Kaori but Shia, why do you think?}

"I, am…"

{The answer is simple. You envy Shia, don't you? You understood from the start that you cannot win against Yue, so you don't even feel jealous of her. There is no way you can attack Kaori no matter how jealous you are at her. That's why, you selected that girl as the target of your attack. The one who was recognized by him as a lover and the easiest one to envy… You really are a coward aren't you?}

"…"

Already, she couldn't hope to avert her eyes. The enemy before her eyes wouldn't allow that. Each timed word pierced her like an arrow. It also shot through her words of rebuttal and broke it apart. Strength was leaking out from under her feet. In contrast, the white Shizuku was overflowing with bountiful strength.

As the proof of that, the white Shizuku stepped in with 'No Beat' and unleashed a kick that scooped up Shizuku from below, not permitting her to react at all.

"Gahah!?"

Against Shizuku, whose breath was forced out and her body floating in the air, countless slashes assaulted her like a pouring rain. At an unconscious level, Shizuku lifted her black katana as a replacement for a shield, but there was no way such a thing could block everything…

"AAAAAAAAH!?"

Her whole body was chopped up to the heart's content of white Shizuku. The white Shizuku struck the sheath at the shrieking Shizuku as though making doubly sure. Shizuku was blown away fiercely as though she was run over by a dump truck and her back struck the ice wall. The ice wall at her back was pulverized in a radiating shape.

All the air in her lungs was forcefully spat out due to the impact that made her whole body act like a ragged cloth. The pain came from so many slash wounds that she didn't understand anymore where the pain come from. Shizuku's body informed her that it was at the limit. Just like that, Shizuku's body slid down the ice wall and now she was in a sitting down posture with her back reclining on the ice while her four limbs splayed open.

Blood stickily stuck on the ice wall, even the ground started to have a puddle of blood gathering there. With hazy eyes, Shizuku was staring at her other self calmly approaching her. Her body couldn't move, the piling up burden on her mind was sapped of any will to move.

{Even your absurd life that kept pulling out the short stick will have the curtain closed here. The reason for this comes as a result of your own hand, you're truly foolish.}

Shizuku didn't respond. She was quiet as she looked up at the white Shizuku. From an appearance with wounds all over her body without even twitching, she even looked like she had expired already.

{Is there something you want to say in your last moment, I wonder? I'll carve it in the ice wall for you. Each of the spaces are connected to each other in this place, so if your luck is good someone who breaks through their trial might arrive here and find you last will you know?}

"…"

Shizuku didn't respond. In exchange, at her cheek, tear drops were flowing down. Grains of light were silently tracing her cheeks, creating a stain on her lap drop by drop.

Shizuku herself wasn't clear just why tears were overflowing like this. Was she in terror because she sensed her own death? Was she in despair that she would lose her future? Was it from the mortification of all the things said to her? Was it from the sadness of being unable to meet her important people anymore… or possibly, from all the above?

While staring down wordlessly, white Shizuku drew back her naked blade tightly behind. She took a crouching posture, her hand that was holding the sheath stuck out in aim. Its target was Shizuku's head.

The sharpness of the white katana was the same as the black katana. It was possible to have her life ended without feeling any pain by piercing through her forehead.

The sudden swelling killing intent and the finishing blow was right in front of her eyes.

In front of the tip that was aiming at her, something inside Shizuku was welling up. Her mouth flapped and closed, trying to express that emotion without caring of her own reputation or appearance.

"… I, still… don't want… to die."

{…}

There was no way anyone would listen to those words here. It was merely earnest words that wished to live. That she still didn't want to die. She wanted to meet… Her best friend, her comrades, and then, the person she fell in love with at this land of another world. One more time.

But, she wasn't able to stand up by herself anymore. Because both her body and her heart were completely tired.

That was why…

"He… lp, me… some, one… he, lp, me… please…"

She wished for help while crying like a child. Shizuku was always someone at the side being relied on, clung on, and then she always gave help to those people. She had never done something like complaining, asking for help to anyone while crying, saying that she couldn't do it anymore, that she couldn't stand it anymore.

In reality, she dreamed of being 'a girl that was protected like a princess', but while she kept looking for that, she was compelled by necessity to polish herself, and then her role became like the knight instead.

Before she knew it, she even tolerated this version of herself without any dissatisfaction, however… as expected…

{How unfortunate. To use those words is too late already.}

Her true feeling that leaked out at the very end was drowned by her merciless other self.

And then, the sublime killing intent was emitted from the white Shizuku. Shizuku reflexively closed her eyes tightly. The brutal white blade thrust straight toward that forehead, to pierce her life.

…

…

"?"

{… This is impossible.}

No matter how much time passed her death didn't arrive. The moment she closed her eyes, she felt like her back got light all of a sudden, but rather than something like that, right now her attention got attracted to the dumbfounded voice of the white Shizuku.

Shizuku timidly opened her eyes.

Over there was…

"Eh, eh?"

"Geez, what's with this timing? Don't tell me this is the aim of the great labyrinth itself."

There was the white tip that stopped just before it touched her skin and the metallic arm that kept it there. With creaking sounds, a metallic artificial arm she had seen before was reaching out from behind her that firmly grasped the white blade, stopping the killing blade a hair breadth from Shizuku.

The complaint that she could hear at the same time made Shizuku opened her eyes wide, and she looked back over her shoulder. Over there was a passage where the ice wall had disappeared before anyone realized, Hajime who seemed like he came out from there appeared, crouching to support the sitting Shizuku with an embrace.

"Na, Nagumo, kun?"

"… Chih, you are too beaten up."

Hajime looked down at Shizuku in a bad mood, next he glared at the white Shizuku with a beastly sharp glint. And then red spark ran from the artificial hand grasping the white katana. Immediately after that, the artificial hand began to vibrate with super high speed that it blurred.

KIIIIIIIIII!!

{-this-}

A peculiar running sound could be heard. At the same time, the white blade creaked and cracked. The dumbfounded white Shizuku returned to her senses with ‘hah’ and pulled back trying to recover her katana but… in the next moment, the white katana was pulverized from halfway as though it was crushed.

Without stopping Hajime aimed his artificial hand straight at the white Shizuku and from its palm explosive slug bullet was fired. Fierce impact attacked the white Shizuku along with a red ripple, blowing her far away.

Furthermore, Hajime took out crossbits and let them fly to the white Shizuku to assault her. He didn’t have any intention of killing her because this wasn’t Hajime’s battle. Until the end, it was only buying time.

To separate the two parties, seven crossbits fired buckshot while taking skilled cooperation. While feeling like the thunderous roar was far away, Shizuku stared fixedly at the face of Hajime who was supporting her back from behind.

It was as though she was seeing a dream, that actually she had been killed and the Hajime in front of her eyes was just a phantom her brain showed her before she died or something. She feared that in the next moment, he would vanish.

Hajime took out a tube container from his ’Treasure Warehouse’ while Shizuku was like that. He opened the lid and without reservation, he thrust it into the mouth of Shizuku that was opened absentmindedly.

“Nmuh!?”

“Don’t spit it out. Drink up like your life depended on it.”

Shizuku’s eyes darted and she almost reflexively spat out the foreign object that suddenly entered her mouth. So that wouldn’t happen, Hajime embraced Shizuku even tighter to make her unable to resist while forcefully making her drink the god water.

Shizuku panicked for a moment, but being hugged tightly by Hajime where his warmth was transmitted to her made her stiffen with a snap this time. While holding the tube in her mouth, she stared hard at the face of Hajime which was at a really close distance. Finally, she was able to comprehend that it was a reality, and she had been saved by a hair’s breadth. She became unable to avert her gaze as though she was imprisoned by Hajime’s eyes.

Before long the body of Shizuku who had gulped down all the god water was healed completely from all the wounds covering her body as though everything was just a lie. However the blood she lost couldn’t be recovered without using regenerative magic, so it didn’t change how weak her body was.

“You are really… Nagumo-kun?”

“Do I look like anything else?”

“Bu, but, why, why are you, here, I…”

“Calm down. I finished my own trial and when I went through the passage that appeared, I came out here. Most likely each space is connected to each other. Well, I thought it’s just too good to be true that I came out behind Yaegashi though.”

“The, then, Nagumo-kun really is, I…”

Perhaps because the pain of her body had vanished, and she felt for real that she had escaped death, this time tears of relief overflowed from her eyes. And then, with her body still embraced, as though to ascertain his existence, it was as though she could see nothing else but Hajime. Shizuku’s hand slowly reached out at Hajime’s cheek. However, just before her hand touched, her expression warped painfully and her hand drew back.

Furthermore, as though to say that being hugged by Hajime mustn’t happen, she weakly pushed on Hajime’s chest and tried to take distance. She rubbed away her overflowing tears with her sleeve and averted her face completely from him.

Looking at Shizuku’s state that was obviously strange, Hajime guessed that she was considerably humiliated by her false image, he gave a glance at white Shizuku who crossed sword with the crossbits using her white katana that should have been broken but now had been recovered and opened his mouth.

“Come on, all your wounds have been recovered completely. Now is the time for a revenge match. Beat her quickly.”

“a. Bu, but, I… I cannot win against that, so…”

Shizuku looked at Hajime with clinging gaze while making an excuse. That appearance from Shizuku that he had never seen before made Hajime looked at the sky thinking “This is not just getting humiliated, even her heart is broken!” He thought that among the four of Kouki’s group that she was the strongest mentally, so honestly, this was unexpected.

The white Shizuku took advantage of the crossbits’ opening and gradually closed the distance. There was no meaning if Hajime defeated it, so the crossbits were moving in a half following pattern, it seemed the white Shizuku was predicting that.

Shizuku showed a frightened look from seeing her approaching white self.

It wasn’t like herself. That appearance was really not like her at all. Possibly, this was her true… Hajime frowned at the scared Shizuku that couldn’t stand up and matched his gaze with her stooped gaze. And then he began to stare at her with an extremely serious face.

“Na, Nagumo-kun? Err, that fellow is…”

“Yaegashi. Don’t worry.”

“Eh?”

Shizuku was flustered toward the approaching enemy, but to be told that while being stared straight with a serious face made blood unconsciously gathered in her face.

In front of such a Shizuku, Hajime abruptly took out a certain thing from his ‘Treasure Warehouse’.

That was…

“Now, take this. This is the ‘Masked Pink—Mark II’ I made for you.”

“… Nagumo-kun?”

While giving a scornful look and feeling angry towards why that thing came out right here, she unintentionally forgot her weak mind. The elaborately designed pink full face mask was forcefully pushed on her. Seeing that showy mask suddenly come out and now being pushed at her real body, even the white Shizuku reflexively stopped in vigilance.

Giving white Shizuku a glance, Hajime kept presenting the Masked Pink–Mark II persistently at Shizuku.

“Nagumo-kun! This is not the time for screwing around! That fellow is coming here!”

“Excuse me. I’m not screwing around at all here. Listen well, if you wear this powered up Masked Pink then your perception ability will be increased by three times. With this, you can win even against that.”

“Wh, what a pointless high-spec like usual…”

“Now you want it right? If you are saying that you cannot win without this, then take it without reservation.”

“I don’t need it! I can win even without wearing that kind of thing! Rather, if I wear that kind of thing I’ll be fighting like mad! Who can bear being treated like a degenerate for the second time because of that thing!”

With a cramped expression, Shizuku fiercely objected at Hajime who was emphasizing his prized item with a serious face. Shizuku rubbed at her temple as though she was enduring a headache.

That gesture and her tone were just like her usual self. Hajime grinned widely at Shizuku who was glaring at him even now and easily stored the Masked Pink–Mark II back into his ‘Treasure Warehouse’. And then, he said to the dumbfounded Shizuku.

“That’s right. You can win, even without this kind of thing.”

“-, I, I am…”

Even while making a face as though she was chewing a bitter bug from how easily she got provoked by Hajime’s incitement, Shizuku couldn’t say anything. Ignoring that, Hajime added more to his words.

“Yaegashi. Don’t forget. That thing is certainly another of your faces, but it’s not everything there is to you. It’s nothing more than a part made up from your negative emotion. The important feeling should be possessed by the Yaegashi Shizuku in front of my eyes right now. Isn’t that right?”

“The thing… possessed by me…”

Memories overflowed in Shizuku’s brain. That was her family’s smile from the bottom of their heart each time she grew. The time when she helped someone together with Kouki and the group. The time when the person they helped thanked them from their heart, how she was able to meet Kaori exactly because of that painful time. And all the other many things that were hard to throw away that she couldn’t forget, filled with warmth and gentleness.

Just why she couldn't remember even a little of those until now… the answer was obvious. That was due to the whispering voice she was hearing since they stepped foot into this great labyrinth little by little guiding her consciousness.

Light of determination returned into Shizuku's eyes. Suddenly lit up light was flowing into Shizuku's four limbs.

"You giving in to the words of that kind of fellow, is also the proof that you are properly facing it. After all, a real good for nothing will only become defiant hearing that. What's left, is what do you want to do? That's all. You are just too serious. Just accept it more irresponsibly, irresponsibly. After all, for the time being if you just survive then later on you can deal with it no matter how many times, anyway you like it."

"Nagumo-kun…"

'By the way, I'm in a good-for-nothing side' Hajime said while shrugging his shoulders, at the same time he began to collect his crossbits back. Him buying time was enough already.

While feeling the gaze of Shizuku staring at him, Hajime leaned on the ice wall and crossed his arms. And then he sent her his words while staring back straight at her. Hajime himself didn't do it intentionally, but surely those words were the ones that Shizuku wanted the most.

"I'll be watching here."

"…"

"You can just keep challenging it until you win. As long as I'm here you won't die. I won't let you die. It's fine."

"… that's… the clincher." (TN: The most accurate meaning is, phrase that brings someone around, esp. in personal relationships)

Those last words were words that were only inside her mouth that didn't reach even the ear of the person herself. Naturally, it shouldn't reach Hajime but, sure enough, what kind of expression would he make if he heard that? Shizuku imagined it, and then she leaked out a chuckle thinking that surely he would make a troublesome expression.

And then, she thought that surely Aiko-sensei and Liliana were also like her without a doubt, to fall in love with this kind of nasty man, it made her feeling strangely amused about just what was wrong with her.

It felt like the her until just now was all lie. She stood up with a light leap as though her body was like a feather. And then, she hugged the black katana that was a present from Hajime tightly in her breast before facing her standing still false image with a determined expression.

With her back toward Hajime, Shizuku asked silently, but with sweetness somewhere in her tone.

"… You will be looking, right? At me."

"Yeah."

“You will protect me when I need it right?”

“Yeah.”

“I see. Then… I’m going.”

“Ou. Go get her.”

Her lost blood wasn’t recovered back. In truth, even now she felt like fainting from blood loss. But, her steps were far more certain even compared to when she first entered this space.

She faced her false image. The white Shizuku was silently waiting with a sheathed blade.

{Really, flirting in front of the enemy? That’s a really good face you have there.}

“Is that so? This is thanks to Nagumo-kun. We aren’t flirting. Though I think it will be great if we can do that.”

{My, my, as I thought you are betraying your best friend. And then, to your rival in love you…}

“Let’s stop this unproductive talk. There is no meaning in this soliloquizing. I’ll survive, then meet Kaori and others one more time. Everything else will start from there.”

{…}

That unshakable Shizuku shut up the white Shizuku. And then she noticed how her strength was weakening little by little. In other words, Shizuku was aware of her own emotion and she began to accept that…

“Perhaps I will have a dispute with her, that I will make her feel a horrible shock. She might even scorn me. But, I won’t give up. I’ll show you that I can haul in the best result for me. I’ll challenge it no matter how many times. I absolutely won’t give up.”

{In the end, you are going to be a fighting woman then?}

“I guess. But, seventeen years, I have been living that long like that until now so it’s too late already. Certainly, I have lived until now by stifling down various things, but what I obtained as the result of that, is also an important thing that I cannot abandon already. And then, I believe that surely from now on too I will obtain the lovelier things… Because it seems, that even a fighting woman can be protected by someone that is far stronger than me.”

{Until the end, it’s still an indirect reason like, ‘because he is an important person for Kaori’ you know? No doubt about that.}

“Even so, right now, I don’t mind.”

Shizuku softly lowered her waist, she lightly drew back one of her feet with the other foot bending forward, taking the stance of quick sword draw.

“I don’t have any extra strength left. One attack. I’ll put everything in this one attack. Endure this if you can.”

{Fufu, I see. What magnificent spirit. Really what a timing he appeared at. Someone who is there at the essential time, in the essential place… I thought something like that existed only inside stories.}

Presence emitted from Shizuku sharpened to the utmost. With her body that had reached the height of fatigue due to the mental burden and bleeding, certainly, she could only put her everything in one attack. It was exactly an attack where she staked her all.

For an instant, the white Shizuku directed a wry smile at the man leaning on the wall who revived Shizuku like a phoenix at the eleventh hour. Surely that whisper was also something that Shizuku undoubtedly felt.

The white Shizuku also similarly dropped her waist and took the stance of a fast draw.

The pressure rapidly swelled up. The determination to beat the opponent emitted like it would cut apart the other by itself came from both sides respectively. Different from the chilly air, the sharp cold filled the surrounding space.

Shizuku's heart was calm like a spring inside a deep forest. Because on her back, she felt a large presence. Because she understood that he was looking straight at her. Because she believed that when the unlikely event happened, he would protect her.

"——fuh."

{Haah!!}

They stepped in simultaneously.

Their ponytails fluttered like falling stars, Shizuku and white Shizuku crossed each other.

And then they stayed unmoving a few meters from each other with their backs facing the other.

And, at that time, a rustled sound could be heard, Shizuku's ponytail was undone. The string that fastened her hair was cut. Was that because of the sword slash, or perhaps it was deteriorating due to several battles…

In the midst of the tension that turned into silence filling the air, the one sheathing her katana… was Shizuku.

chin The moment the pleasant small sound of the sheath resounded, the white Shizuku slipped off smoothly. Her body was bisected into two. Like that, the figure swayed and blurred before melting and vanishing in the air. Its face looked from the side seemed to smile broadly in satisfaction.

Right after that, Shizuku's body stumbled to the side, and she crumbled down. She became unable to stand up after her feeling slackened down due to being freed from extreme fatigue and nervousness.

But, Shizuku didn't strike the hard ground.

"Splendid. As always, that's admirable swordsmanship." (TN: The kanji used in the admirable word can also be used for falling in love.)

"Nagumo-kun… fufu, you can also proceed to fall in love from there you know?"

“What are you saying?”

“My, that’s unfortunate.”

Hajime gently lowered Shizuku on the ground.

After Shizuku cracked that joke, a third path different from the passage Shizuku passed and the path Hajime came out from melted out from the wall.

“Yaegashi, you have difficulty in walking?”

“It seems so. I need a little rest. Although, nothing can be done about the blood loss so I need regeneration magic used on me. In any case, I cannot move properly right now… and so Nagumo-kun, take care of me okay?”

“Aa?”

“Carry me in your arms okay?”

“… Yaegashi, did you change a little? Like you have no reservation anymore, or you became shameless…”

Toward Shizuku who spread open her arms demanding to be carried in his arm, Hajime only returned a slightly bewildered gaze at her. Shizuku leaked out a chuckle while enjoyably swaying her downed straight black hair.

“I’m just thinking that I’ll be slightly more honest. Rather than that, let’s quickly link up with everyone else. That’s right. Nagumo-kun, can you create an artifact enchanted with regeneration magic I wonder? You had included that function in the black katana too but the effect is insignificant.”

Hajime tilted his head toward Shizuku’s change while thinking that indeed it wasn’t guaranteed that anything would happen until they linked up with Yue and others, so he responded to her request because it would be better if she recovers quickly. Shizuku made a further request while he took out material from the ‘Treasure Warehouse’.

“While you are at it, can you make it a hair ornament? See, my hair string was cut. It’s better if it’s cute. Sort of like that snow crystal you gifted for Yue and the others.”

“… What a demanding fellow. It looks like you are really cutting loose on various things, huh?”

Even while complaining, Hajime thought “Well, let’s make it for the success celebration too”. He used a pearl-like crystal with a faint radiance which had high affinity with magic power, making a hairclip from that. It was like countless fruits in a row, or perhaps like drops of morning dew lining on a leaf, a row of beautiful jewels.

“It’s pretty…”

“Here, it’s fine like this right? Let’s go quickly after you wear it.”

For a while, Shizuku stared ecstatically at the regenerative hairclip created in less than a minute, but she then tied her hair in a ponytail in panic after Hajime called out at her.

“… How do I look?”

With her cheeks reddened, Shizuku looked up at him and asked that question. Seeing that Hajime’s perplexity deepened thinking that as he thought something was strange.

“… It’s falling far short of the real regeneration magic, but there was no problem when I attached regeneration magic in it to work on the flesh you see.”

“… That’s not what I’m asking, though.”

Of course, Hajime understood what Shizuku was actually asking him. However, for some reason, this exchange gave Hajime a déjà vu. It was just like, yes, it was exactly the same like the atmosphere Aiko showed him at the god mountain… yes.

Even while sighing deeply at Hajime who was playing dumb, “Well, guess it cannot be helped” Shizuku shrugged her shoulders before slowly holding out both her arms. It was wordless, and the second request for a carry.

Anyway, it was definite that Shizuku couldn’t move properly, so reluctantly Hajime was going to take out gravity stone from ‘Treasure Warehouse’, but Shizuku beat him to the punch.

“If you are planning to crucify me like before then I’m in firm opposition to that. When we are coming out from this great labyrinth, I’ll circulate Nagumo-kun’s rumor as a seriously ill patient.”

“…”

Of course, it was patently obvious what kind of sickness Shizuku meant based on where her gaze was looking at. His hair, eye patch, artificial arm, Shizuku’s gaze was moving alternately on those things.

Hajime wordlessly returned the gravity stone. In this case, Hajime guessed that she obviously would also refuse being carried like in a stretcher. It seemed that she persistently wanted to be carried by arms.

This unusual selfishness of Shizuku was increasingly spurring the bad premonition in his chest. However, they also couldn’t stay here for much longer. He also wanted to be spared from a lethal wound by Shizuku, so reluctantly Hajime crouched while showing his back in front of Shizuku’s eyes.

“Muu, it’s better if it’s princess carry, but… it can’t be helped.”

‘What is it that couldn’t be helped’, sealing such a retort at the bottom of his heart, Hajime got up while ignoring to the utmost the weight and soft sensation transmitted on his back. Wasting no time, Shizuku tightly entangled her arms around Hajime. Her body was also pressing on him as tightly as possible.

Hajime stood up, he wordlessly entered the newly appeared passage and began walking silently. He guessed that surely this passage was also connected to the space of another person.

There, a whispering voice reached him. It wasn’t the whispering voice of the labyrinth. It was Shizuku’s voice that contained more sweetness. She was talking into his ear in a posture where she put her head on Hajime’s shoulder.

“Hey, Nagumo-kun.”

“Hm? What?”

“Did you listen to the conversation between me and the other me?”

“No, I was too far, the voices of you two were also small.”

Hajime shook his head toward Shizuku’s question. Shizuku murmured “I see…”, then she showed a gesture of thinking a little about something. And then, she showed her palm in front of Hajime’s eyes while opening her mouth once again.

“This hand, it has hardened from holding a sword right? As I thought, this is not a hand of a woman.”

Hajime didn’t understand the intention of the question and his expression turned dubious, but for the time being, he sent his gaze toward the palm of Shizuku in front of his eyes. Certainly, the skin of her palm looked thick and hard. That was the proof of the many years she spent polishing her skill.

“If you said, that a soft hand without a single scratch is a ‘woman’s hand’, certainly this hand doesn’t look like that.”

“…”

“But, I think it’s a good hand.”

“… Really?”

“Yeah. Compared to the hand of someone that has never carried anything heavier than a chopstick, this hand is far prettier.”

“…”

Hearing those words, Shizuku’s exposed palm suddenly clenched tightly into a fist, hiding her palm as though it suddenly got shy. At the same time, the strength of her arm embracing him grew stronger.

“Nagumo-kun, thank you for coming to save me.”

“It’s not like I was coming to save you. That was just a coincidence.”

“Fufu, that other me said it. It was like a story in a book. Even that time in Orcus and the time in the palace was also like that. Were you actually choosing the timing?”

“Don’t talk stupid. Each time, I was just barely… no, that time with Kaori I was late in a meaning. Anyway, there was nothing worse for the heart compared to those times. I want more surplus time for that here.”

Shizuku leaked out a chuckle at the fed up Hajime.

“You see. On the inside, I am really girlish you know? Actually rather than sword art, I wanted to play house, I yearned for something like a princess that is protected by the cool boy. Even at Haltina Great Labyrinth when I was pulled into the dream world, I was a princess that experienced a love story with a knight. Though as expected, that was really a painful story that I cannot tell to anyone.”

“Certainly, that must be painful.”

Shizuku smiled wryly saying “There is a better way for saying that” while poking at the head of Hajime who expressed his honest impression without mercy.

“Well, you are wondering what I want to say, right? Because I am someone like that, I’m really thankful to Nagumo-kun that always came running when I was in danger, that’s what I mean. When you told me that you are watching, also when you told me you won’t let me die, I felt really really grateful.”

“… You are exaggerating. If Yaegashi died…”

“Kaori will be sad, right? I know that. Those times weren’t for me, you did those for Kaori’s sake.”

Shizuku cut over Hajime’s words. There was no sign of self-depreciation in what she was saying. She was really just saying the truth, her air was quite indifferent.

Certainly, it was like that, but the way Shizuku said that it was like he was being seen through that “If it is for Kaori’s sake you will do anything right?”, that made him dissatisfied that he added some correction.

“… 80 percent is because of that.”

Shizuku was puzzled. If he said that around 80 percent was for Kaori’s sake then…

“And the remaining 20 percent?”

“Well, that’s because Yaegashi is a good fellow, see? I’m not going to actively try to forsake you.”

“…”

Unexpectedly, if Shizuku was in a pinch, then Hajime was going to proactively reach out his hand to her. Understanding that such feelings existed inside Hajime, Shizuku’s cheeks were slightly tinged with heat.

And then she buried her face into Hajime’s neck while sleekly dropping a bomb just like her best friend was prone to do.

“Nagumo-kun, I want to quickly meet up with Kaori. Not just Kaori, but I want to meet Yue, Shia, and Tio too. And then, I’m going to say to them that I have fallen in love with Nagumo-kun. I don’t know what is going to happen, but I want to try being a little more honest and clash ahead.”

“Is that so? If that’s the case then, let’s qui… oi, Yaegashi, just now, you.”

“Nagumo-kun, I’m a little… tired. Protect me… properly… kay”

In Hajime’s ear, soft breathing sound of a sleeper could be heard gradually. It seemed that she had fallen asleep, entrusting her body to Hajime. Her skill to leave alone a bomb right after dropping it was a deed that was exactly the same as her best friend.

Hajime frowned before fixing his hold on Shizuku while continuing to walk silently. Inside his heart, he was holding his head wondering “How does it become like this?”

Not noticing how the cheeks of Shizuku became bright red like an apple…

Chapter 144 – Completely Forgotten Memory

“FLY AWAYYYYYYY!!”

{GUUUUUH!!}

In a huge space where an ice pillar was located, Shia's resounding battle yell was followed by a thunderous roar produced from Doryuken. Mixed among those sounds, a Shia with black rabbit ears, a black tail, and black hair crashed into the center ice pillar with a grand impact.

The impact pulverized a part of the ice pillar scattering ice fragments magnificently everywhere. Inside the glittering ice fragments reflecting light, the black Shia, Shia's false image, was holding her left shoulder, crouching on the floor while lifting her face. There was a bitter smile that seemed to say "You got me" floating on her face.

{Ahaha, you aren't moved at all, eh? Indeed, it should be a darkness that you are harboring but……}

"That is that. How my family got driven out, how a lot of them lost their lives, no matter how much it was glossed over, no matter how tormented with guilt I am, no matter how much I try to obtain forgiveness, it doesn't change that I am the cause of all those, those are things that I have to shoulder for my whole life. That worry, that resolve, I have since a long time ago."

{… What is called the darkness of the heart, is something that will sink people into the bottom of the swamp even with all that you know.}

The part of darkness nesting inside your heart wasn't something that someone could be liberated from so easily. Therefore, the false image Shia could only laugh seeing how Shia went completely unshaken no matter how many negative words she had whispered since the start of the battle.

"You are me, but as expected you are not everything of me. I understand that the will of the great labyrinth is included in you. If that's not the case, then from the start you should have understood already that the current me won't be shaken by words of that level."

Shia tapped her Doryukken on her shoulder while sending a powerful gaze at her false image who was trying to stand with trembling legs. In those eyes, just as the person herself said, there was not a single waver. For the current Shia, the average mental attack wouldn't even give her an itch.

Certainly, it was because of her that her family was driven out from the Sea of Trees, and due to that, she lost a number of her family members. For Shia, that was a nightmare that couldn't possibly be forgotten, an eternal wound of the heart. But she wouldn't stop moving because of that torment anymore.

The reason was simple. Because Haulia clan was already strong, they chose the path that they walked by themselves. And because at her side, there was her beloved lover and friend.

Her families, including her father Kam who was strong and gentle through thick and thin had sent her off. Hajime, who was entrusted with Shia by Haulia, had accepted Shia from the bottom of his heart. Yue, who sometimes was like her big sister, sometimes as her best friend, always allowed Shia to nestle close to her.

For herself who was that blessed to 'fall' at her own convenience, was something unforgivable especially to Shia herself above all. She had been completely helped. All this time she had been protected. It was impossible for her to bend her knee just from hearing her own feeling. For the current Shia, she felt like she wouldn't lose no matter what kind of enemy she faced.

{Indeed, no matter what I say, it's only me who gets weaker. I see, this trial to 'overcome oneself', you have cleared it already from a long time ago.}

"That's how it is. My important people are waiting so… I'll force my way through!"

{Fufuh, fine. The last attack, do it to your heart's content!}

The white and black Shia stepped with a force that pulverized the ground, at the same time they charged while their partner the war hammer burst. Echoing bursting sound and the impact sound that was like the air screaming. Attacks that were respectively unleashed from a large swing while rotating once surpassed the sound barrier and broke through the white membrane.

Two war hammers clashed right from the front, producing a thunderous roar and impact that pulverized the surroundings. A crater with Shia and the false image at the center was created as though an explosion happened.

And then, the one that was blown away was… the black Shia.

The black Doryuken that left her hand was spinning in the air. Black Shia was blown away in a parabolic arc before she flickered and vanished without waiting to hit the floor. She was melting in the air from her legs. At last, when her head was vanishing her lips slightly loosened.

At the ground zero, Shia who was still in her posture of swinging Doryuken went "Fuu~", she slowly breathed out and relaxed her body. Nearby, *karan, koron* the sound of cartridge falling on the ground resounded.

"Everyone that went ahead, will they think proudly of the current me, I wonder…"

While leaking a wry smile at her own words that naturally slipped out while looking at the ceiling, Shia shouldered back her Doryuken. Ahead of Shia's gaze, a new passage appeared.

"Surely for Hajime-san and the others, this trial won't be a problem but… it's worrying about Shizuku-san and her friends."

While stepping into the new passage in a rush, Shia thought about Shizuku and her friends whose conditions were considerably beaten up due to the labyrinth, which put a worried expression on her face.

Actually, she never would have imagined that Shizuku would overcome the trial and raise her maiden power.

Shia's rabbit ears were twitching while she was trotting through the passage when she finally reached a dead end ahead. For a moment, Shia considered whether she mistook the path, but her excellent sensing ability caught a familiar presence at the other side of the dead end causing her to reflexively made a joyful face.

Keeping her trot, she raised Doryuken in order to destroy the ice wall. A passage was created for her. There was no way the passage ahead was a dead end. An entrance would be automatically created there, which was something she could easily imagine, but… her mental tendency was to think "Let's destroy the obstacle anyway!" Just who influenced her to think like this would be anyone's guess.

“RYAAAAAhuaa-to-to!”

Doryuken was swung in order to smash the ice wall and as expected, lost its target because the ice wall vanished automatically when Shia was near. This caused her to hit empty air. Shia stumbled from the centrifugal force and flew into the new space just like that.

“A, ahaha, I guess this is how it works if you think about it. So, it opened up. … I wasn’t seen by Yue-san, was I?”

Shia’s cheeks reddened from embarrassment while her gaze was timidly wandering around in wonder whether her failure was seen by Yue or not. Yes, the presence that Shia sensed was Yue’s. Her tension rose up from happiness that she could be reunited with Yue quickly.

In the end, indeed there was a Yue ahead of her gaze. The same as with Shia, at the center of the huge space there was a gigantic cylinder ice pillar, Yue was standing quietly beside it. Her back was facing Shia, so Shia didn’t know what expression Yue was making.

There was no presence other than Yue at the surrounding, Shia could see two other passages other than the one she came out from, so she guessed that Yue had already defeated her other self.

Shia smiled proudly of Yue’s achievement and she was going to call out to her. But, there, Shia suddenly noticed how strangely ragged Yue’s state was.

Of course, Yue had ‘Automatic Regeneration’, so she couldn’t receive an external physical wound. But her clothes were not included as the target of that ability so there was a need to use regeneration magic but… her clothes, here and there they were torn, burned, or frozen.

That was to say that Yue received the attack of her false image time and time again…

Shia widened her eyes slightly. Even if it was Yue whose way of fighting was pressuring the opponent with even more vast pressure while getting attacked herself, based on the nature of this trial Shia thought Yue would be able to clear it unharmed.

Furthermore, although she had defeated her false image, Yue didn’t advance ahead. Far from that, she didn’t even repair her clothes and stood while thinking deeply of something. From how Yue was slightly looking up without the slightest twitch, it was possible that she hadn’t even notice Shia’s entrance.

Toward Yue who was drifting off in an atmosphere that felt hard to approach, Shia slightly hesitated. She took a deep breath and raised a determined voice.

“Yue-san!”

“… Shia?”

Toward that bright voice that reverberated in the room, for an instant, Yue twitched in surprise before looking back over her shoulder. And then, looking at the figure of the smiling Shia there her eyes looked down.

“Shia… the rooms are connected?”

“Yes. That’s how it looks like. I cleared the trial, passed the newly created passage and arrived here. Yue-san, you have cleared yours too, haven’t you?”

“… Nn. No… problem.”

Shia only confirmed her result without mentioning the terrible state of Yue’s clothes. Perhaps finally noticing her own state due to that, Yue used regeneration magic while glancing a little embarrassedly at the unharmed Shia. In an instant, her clothes were repaired.

Shia felt lost inside her heart. Should she ask her whether something happened or not?

Yue was obviously shaken from the words of her false image. To the degree that she excessively got hit, to the degree that she even forgot to fix her state, to the degree that she didn’t notice Shia’s approach.

Just what in the world was said to her? Yue’s appearance was unthinkable to come from how she normally was. That was how severe the words were that the false image had told Yue. For that reason, what kind of words should Shia say to the shaken Yue, or should she snuggle close to Yue until Yue had put herself in order. Shia was hesitating between the two choices.

(Just what in the world… Yue-san didn’t seem particularly affected in the labyrinth. I didn’t think Yue-san could be shaken by being confronted regarding the relationship between Hajime-san and us. I guess, the darkness of Yue-san’s heart, it might be the betrayal three hundred years before… hmm, even that feels like it’s already too old for the present…)

Exactly because Yue was important to her, the inside of Shia’s heart kept muttering like that.

“… Shia, I’m fine. Rather than that, let’s advance forward.”

“Yue-san… you are right. Let’s quickly reunite with Hajime-san and others!”

“… Nn. I want to quickly meet Hajime.”

“Fufu, that’s right!”

Yue guessed what Shia was thinking and made a wry smile while urging her toward the new passage.

Yue was obviously not ‘okay’. Despite this, Shia couldn’t skillfully say any words for Yue’s sake. It made her down to the point that her rabbit ears flopped down and looked withered. But she put herself together thinking ‘when we meet with Hajime-san surely we will manage somehow!’, and with a deliberately bright tone she agreed with Yue.

Like that, the two of them walked through the new passage side by side.

“Everyone, I wonder if they are able to safely overcome the trial? I think the difficulty level is lower than the forest of tree labyrinth but… the condemning here is unique, isn’t it?”

“… Nn, indeed. Perhaps it’s impossible for someone like the hero (lol).”

“Isn’t that right? Because this trial is something like his natural enemy…”

Along the way, the two of them became animated with trifling talk. Yue was nonchalantly handing down a sharp evaluation of Kouki, but in general what she was saying wasn’t mistaken, so Shia couldn’t say

anything. Certainly, for Kouki who loved to have a convenient interpretation, this trial that was pushing various things at them was considerably unfit for him.

Although even though they were raising Kouki in the topic, inside their hearts worry for the hero was nonexistent. It was merely the flow of their dialogue, and in any case, it was also Shia's encouragement toward Yue who tended to submerge herself inside her own heart. Anyway, compared to one of them staying quiet, talking like this was Shia's consideration for distracting the mood.

Perhaps Yue also noticed Shia's intention, since she responded to the talk with the an air of humor. However, as expected, after a moment it looked like her mind was going far away somewhere. Her eyes strangely lost focus, wandering as though they were looking at a far distance.

In the back of Yue's mind, the words of the false image she fought just now were flowing once more.

—Who was the real betrayer?

—You still, don't remember?

—About your parents?

—What are you, did you forget?

—You are just trying not to think of it?

—You are running away?

—You are really thinking that you can be at his side forever?

"…"

The sneering false image of herself. That fake kept using words that hinted at the tragedy three hundred years ago.

Three hundred years ago… Yue was the inheritor of the throne of the vampire clan's country. It was a small country, but it was a country so powerful that it was extolled as the country of a small fierce god.

The reason for that was the characteristic of the race of the vampire clan. Through the intermediary of blood, they strengthened their body, magnified their magic power, and lengthened their life. There was no other race with such a power. The act of sucking blood itself also made others harbor thoughts of awe.

The one born of the direct royal lineage of such a country was Yue. She stood out with beauty and overflowing magic power causing her to be given expectations since she was a baby. She had the natural talent to absorb all the magic and knowledge taught to her. Unfortunately, she didn't have talent in martial arts alone, but Yue's existence was so clearly above the rest that such a thing could be decided to be unnecessary.

And then what guaranteed her status was the cheating ability she manifested at the age of twelve. The direct manipulation of magic power and the ability to configure the magic circle by imagination, and then the characteristic magic 'Automatic Regeneration'——those were terrific abilities just like those from the characters who were recorded at the age of the gods.

At that time, there was so many countries in number that couldn't be compared with the present, the war only kept intensifying, but Yue who was dispatched on the battlefield as ready fire power for her country amply exhibited her strength, trampling down the enemy literally like a fierce god.

As the result, Yue's fame and awe increased, and at seventeen she ascended to the throne.

At twelve, she was smeared with the killing intent and hatred of the battlefield, and just five years later she became the pillar that supported the country. If it was a normal girl, surely she would be crushed by the pressure and her mind fall sick. But Yue was too strong and wise to be crushed from that.

There was also the help of her trusted vassals and her uncle who was the prime minister. After that too, Yue bet everything and offered her all for the country's sake. he protected her country throughout the war. She believed that she would keep protecting them just like that.

Until that day when her most trusted uncle along with his subordinates came to kill her.

After two years passed since Yue succeeded the throne, she noticed that a strange distance was created between her and her uncle. No, honestly speaking her uncle began to avoid Yue. And his subordinates were also the same.

Yue at that time was very perplexed at the sudden distance with her uncle, who in a certain meaning she had contact with even longer than both her parents. While worrying whether she had made a mistake that displeased her uncle, several times she tried to create a chance for the two of them to talk.

However, ultimately the chance for the two of them to speak frankly with each other didn't come to pass when she noticed a gap had been created in their relationship and a few more years passed.

Furthermore, unnoticed by her, the awe of the people toward Yue changed into simple terror toward a monster. Bad rumors regarding Yue were flowing without pause. Her great service in the battlefield for the sake of protecting her country was ironically spurring those rumors.

The people who she trusted the most had already left Yue's side with no one remaining. In exchange, her uncle's political power was increasing and people gathered around him. Such a thing happened to an unnatural degree.

And then, that final day arrived. The day of destiny.

At the time while she was welcoming an envoy from another country in the throne room, her uncle along with his subordinates in full equipment rushed in. And then they slaughtered without question her. These close aides that were from the faction of the previous king and queen, their killing blade, killing intent, were also directed at Yue.

While Yue was dumbfounded, her body was hit with lethal attacks many times. Her 'Automatic Regeneration' instantly recovered her wounds, but even so Yue was at the height of confusion, no, Yue was denying the reality and didn't even try to counter attack. Then she noticed she had been sealed with her body unable to move, and in the middle of transport to be imprisoned in that abyss.

Looking at it objectively, what happened could only be seen as her uncle aiming at the throne of the king due to his ambition causing a coup d'état. Actually, Yue herself submitted to reality and came to think that her uncle betrayed her during her three hundred year imprisonment.

But, but…

(… Why didn't un… that man, kill me?)

That was right. That strangeness Yue only realized now while being sneered by her own false image.

That day of destiny. Yue didn't resist the betrayal of her uncle. All this time, Yue was convinced that her uncle helplessly sealed her because he couldn't kill her due to the 'Automatic Regeneration'. The absolute darkness of three hundred years, and then the overwhelming isolation had stolen all thought of any other possibility.

But, 'Automatic Regeneration' wasn't absolute. It was dependent on magic power. If her magic power dried up, then she wouldn't regenerate. It was possible to kill her if she was continuously attacked until her magic power ran out. In actuality, Yue didn't resist because of the extreme shock and in the end, her magic power was considerably decreased because she regenerated too much.

Her uncle should have killed Yue.

(… He was strong. He was at a level above the rest both as a politician and also as a fighter. For such a man to fail to kill me at that place… was impossible.)

In the back of Yue's mind, the memory of three hundred years ago was resurrected vaguely. The truth that was pushed at the deepest recess of her mind inside the darkness was coming back little by little in a clearer image.

(… That man didn't kill me, but he had to seal me. … Why is that?)

Yue immersed herself in her thought and traveled down memory lane. A nostalgic voice resounded in the back of her mind. A tone of voice that was gentle, yet painted with sadness and frustration, and also guilt to the utmost.

(—, I'm sorr—. Other than this, there is no other wa— Someday, surely, —a person you can lean on will appear. If it's that person, surely they will protect you from—without fail. —, I, do something like thi—. But, don't for—. —e, I love—)

Blond hair exactly the same as hers. Red eyes. Face with standing out wrinkles carved from hardships. For Yue who was hazy due to the effect of the seal and the mental burden and the heavy consumption of her magic power, she couldn't listen to everything. But, one thing that she remembered— was the sensation of the hand lovingly brushing the cheek of Yue that was sticking out from the cube that sealed her.

Yue quietly brought her hand to her cheek. Somehow she felt like she could feel the warmth of that time. That was a warmth different from Hajime. If she had to say, it was like what a parent would direct toward their daughter…

(… I, was thinking of that man as a father? But, that's, my real Otou-sama and Okaa-sama were…)

To someone who should be a betrayer, who should be a hated enemy, a fragment of her memory was contrary to her expectation. She searched for her true parents deep in her hazy memory.

However, no matter how hard she fished at the shelves of her memory, no proper recollection came out. But rather than forgetting, it was more like there was no impressive event with them that she could remember even after three hundred years passed… that was how she felt.

On the contrary, she had the feeling in her fragmentary recollection of her parents, that they somehow resembled closely the atmosphere of the people of the country that she saw at the trial of the Merujiine Undersea Ruins.

It felt like an ice block slid down Yue's back. Chilling shakes assaulted her whole body.

(… Don't tell me, Otou-sama and others were…)

After she started doubting, unnatural memories kept coming out the more she pulled out.

Based on Yue's memory, the war at that time was also heavily influenced by religion with no exception. But she thought that her country was unnaturally thinly related with such thing.

Even after Yue was enthroned, when she came into contact with the religious envoy her uncle would also attend with her without fail. In the first place, as long as the situation wasn't something that was really important then it would be her uncle that would deal with all that.

Her uncle was deeply knowledgeable and wiser than anyone. If it was about domestic affairs, if it was on the battlefield, he was a powerful familiar user that made use of several monsters. But, now that she thought about it, it felt like he was off the proper track as a vampire.

Both of Yue's parents treasured her and raised her up like a princess, they would give her anything she wanted and allowed anything that she wanted to do, but now when she looked back, rather than seeing it as love of parents toward their child, it felt like more of a respect and affection for her.

Rather, it was her uncle that gave her love as a parent.

Yue suddenly recalled.

(… That man when he began to put distance with me… he looked really painful.)

Her uncle, after one year past her enthronement, was constantly frowning in distress, it was like he was rapidly aging. That change was surely unnoticed except only by the people who were extremely close to him. Yue at that time was also feeling very worried at the same time when she was feeling anxiety and sadness from their distance.

Her uncle betrayed her for the sake of his ambition and imprisoned her for a very long time inside the prison of darkness. Yue believed that, but she was shaken by the words of her false image, a fragment of her resurrected memory was slowly showing Yue another possibility.

Surely, looking at it objectively, being imprisoned in endless darkness had fixed itself in Yue's memory completely. If she didn't hate someone, didn't throw away her hope and soaked in despair while passing her time apathetically, her heart wouldn't last. That was why she firmly took the reasoning that looked the most correct as truth.

But…

(… I mistook my memory?)

By any chance, there might be something different to the truth. Yue who began to think so and once more asked a question.

That was… why did her uncle have to seal her?

At the same time, the words of her false image flashed.

——You really think that you can be at his side forever?

"…"

Terror ran through Yue's body. Reflexively, she embraced herself tightly to repress her body that was going to tremble.

Hajime was the light for Yue. He appeared by tearing apart the darkness, illuminating, warming her, a light that gave her peace and happiness. To lose that, was the same as death for Yue.

But, if, if it turned out that she couldn't stay by his side…

"Yue-san!"

"!? Ah, Shia?"

When she noticed, Shia had caught Yue's shoulders and stared at Yue from the front with a serious gaze. Just how much had she immersed herself in her thoughts? When she noticed, the end of the path was visible behind Shia who was looking at her, It seemed they had walked until the end of the path.

Shia released her hand from the absent-minded Yue's shoulders. This time, she grasped Yue's two hands tightly. She clasped those hands to her chest in order to transmit her existence and warmth to Yue even for a bit.

"Please talk, Yue-san. What was said to you?"

"That's…"

Shia threw away her hesitation looking at Yue's abnormal condition and asked straight. She thought that she must not wait anymore to deal with Yue because there was no more time for careful consideration.

Shia was staring from really close as though to peer into Yue who was speaking ambiguously. Looking at Shia's determined face, Yue felt that she couldn't avert this talk and sighed deeply.

"… I'm sorry Shia. I myself still haven't sorted this out."

"You cannot talk about it?"

"… Nn. I was told of various things about the past… my feelings toward Hajime and Shia is not shaken at all so there was no problem with the trial but… from that, there might be a mistake in what my memory remembers. I want to sort it out, so wait for a little."

"Is that so…"

Shia didn't seem like she could accept it. Her hands were grasping Yue's hands tightly and didn't loosen at all.

Thinking back, Shia had really come far and become strong, Yue secretly smiled of that. And then she considered while looking at her grasped hands.

Even though she was just a regretful rabbit that could only run away and cling to other people, she desperately worked hard, followed them with her all, and before they realized it, she had become like this, someone that could protect them. She even made the obstinate Hajime surrender. Perhaps she couldn't even call her as someone like her little sister anymore. Now she was a splendid woman.

Perhaps because of that… the words which welled up from her bad premonitions leaked out from Yue's mouth.

"… Shia."

"Yes. What is it, Yue-san?"

"… If, if, something happens to me then please take care of Hajime."

"…"

Those words were entrusted to a beloved person, with a serious gaze. For Yue, those words were the greatest and highest words of trust.

But, Shia who was entrusted with those words…

PAN-!!

"!?"

Returned a slap.

It wasn't done with body reinforcement, but even so, it was a serious slap without any mercy or holding back. The eyes of Yue whose head was turned away from the snap widened. She returned her gaze at Shia, there, she met eyes burning in rage that she had never witnessed until now.

"… Are you joking?"

Her voice too contained rage that she had never heard until now. Shia's body was trembling, surely from the overflowing emotion that she was currently repressing. Even her atmosphere, it was like the scorching magma that she experienced at the Guuryuen Great Volcano.

It was Shia's serious fury. That great pressure and rage made Yue stiffened for a moment.

She immediately opened her mouth to make an excuse.

"You, you're wrong… I, if it's Shia…"

"So it's not a joke?"

Shia confirmed with scorching tone while taking a step back from Yue. She then abruptly shouldered Doryuken. She looked down at the dumbfounded Yue with dangerously narrowed eyes. And then, Shia opened her mouth with even more scorching low voice.

“I don’t know what you were told about, but you really turned into a pathetic coward, didn’t you? That pathetic face, I’ll put it into shape together with your guts.”

“… Shim Shia? Wa—”

Toward Shia who was releasing tremendous rage, Yue tried to tell her to calm down. At that moment, an attack of Doryuken without a single drop of mercy was swung at her.

Yue barely back stepped to dodge the horizontal sweep. Doryuken passed by and impacted the ice wall at the side without stopping, pulverizing it with a thunderous roar. Although the ice wall began to regenerate immediately, the radial hole that was instantly created showed Shia’s seriousness.

“… Shia. This joke has gone too far.”

“Joke? Are you still saying cowardly thing like that after it has reached this point? If you don’t understand, then I’ll say it clearly, I’m serious here. If you don’t withdraw your previous joking statement… yes, I, will seriously wreck up Yue-san.”

“… Shia, I’m seriously-”

“FLY AWAY! SHAORAAAAAA!!”

“!?”

Shia’s Doryuken was swung fiercely once more. The speed of the swing surpassed the sound barrier and generated a wall of air like a white membrane, right after that, *PAN-* a bursting sound exploded. And then, the ice wall of the passage that was hit was pulverized into very small fragments with just one attack.

Yue desperately evaded that attack in the narrow passage with few places to dodge. But in the first place, close range combat wasn’t her specialty. She was already surpassed by Shia who specialized in that range. It was clear that she would be immediately cornered.

Yue thought that she had to restrain and calm Shia down first. She resolved herself and stood her ground in the storm. In a moment, the war hammer was swung down with a terrific momentum from above. That grazed Yue’s right shoulder and pulverized her shoulder bone just from that.

Even while staggering from the pain and impact, Yue left that kind of wound to her ‘Automatic Regeneration’, invoked her ‘Calamity Sky’ and sewed the swung down Doryuken to the ground. At the same time, she invoked ‘Ice Coffin’ and jumped over the leaning forward Shia.

While turning around, ice was visibly rising rapidly from below Shia’s foot. Just like usual, Yue’s ‘Ice Coffin’ was trying to lock her inside the ice.

But, for the current Shia, there was no way a magic of that level could stop her.

“That’s naïve, Yue-san!”

Doryuken should be hard to move with the weight of ‘Calamity Sky’, even if it could be moved the ice was clinging too close to the body that she wouldn’t be able to break it with Doryuken… Yue thought that but Shia suddenly raised one of her hands and struck down on the ground.

Instantly, *DON-!!* such shockwave sound was generated while the surrounding ice was blown away with Shia as the center. She blew away the ice clinging to her body by generating an impact with her fist.

Furthermore, without stopping she lifted up Doryuken with all her strength, changing it into firing mode and pulling the trigger without a moment’s delay.

A bullet flew out along with a bursting sound. A slug bullet in a narrow and straight passage — naturally it was hopeless trying to dodge it and Yue employed a protective wall. Aiming at that, this time Shia fired the slug bullets rapidly. Inside the passage, magic power rippled as faint blue color were spreading in many layers and the grand impact was raging on.

“… Shia! Stop playing around.”

“That’s my line, Yue-san. Have you come to reflect on yourself a little to withdraw your statement?”

“… Why?”

“Why? Do you really not understand?”

“…”

The protective wall was cracked due to the impact of the bursting slug bullets. Naturally, Yue immediately repaired it, but she couldn’t move due to the extreme rapid fire.

Yue looked at Shia across the protective wall. She was looking while frowning sadly, wondering why Shia was that angry toward the proof of trust she gave her.

But, ahead of her gaze — the expression of Shia who was pulling the trigger of firing mode Doryuken was even sadder than Yue’s, even now she looked like she was going to cry. There was still fury overflowing there, but she was obviously hurt by Yue’s words.

“You said you entrusted, that means the future ahead from there will be without Yue-san there isn’t it…”

“… Shia.”

“Something like that, such a future… do you think I will accept it? Do you think I will be happily permitting it!? Do you think I will honestly say [yes] hearing that!”

The reason Shia was angry was, in other words, something like that. It sounded nice if it was called trust, certainly it was the greatest trust Yue could show, but for the receiving side it was something intolerable.

That was natural. Shia loved Yue. A trust with the assumption that Yue who she loved wasn’t there wasn’t something she could accept with a smile while saying “Yes, that’s fine.”

After Shia fired the last bullet of Doryuken, she stepped forward with a force that pulverized the ground. Yue whose eyes widened in realization from Shia's words, for a moment, shaved her consciousness from controlling her magic.

That was a fatal opening in front of the current Shia. Doryuken weight was increased up to two tons in one mercilessly strike.

"Guh!"

The protective wall was pulverized, a shockwave along with strong wind attacked Yue. She has blown away magnificently.

In that interval, Shia instantly reloaded Doryuken's bullet. And then Yue has blown away until the wall of the dead end. The moment the entrance of the passage behind her opened, she was further struck by the bursting slug bullet.

"'Divine Severance'!"

Once more Yue deployed a protective wall while she was protected by that spherical wall she has blown away into the room from the entrance due to the impact.

From inside the flame explosion that wrapped the entrance of the passage, Shia leaped into the room with her rabbit ears flapping.

Ahead of them was…

"Fue!?"

{Wha, what is!?}

The appearance of Kaori and a gray false image in Nointo's appearance stiffened in their posture where their twin swords locked with each other.

"Now, Yue-san! If you don't want to be wrecked up, please say sorry right now!!"

Shia pointed with a snap at Yue with her Doryuken.

… It seemed that she planned to ignore Kaori there completely.

Chapter 145 – First Big Fight

Kaori had left the passage and stepped through the shining doors leading out of the maze. Just like for the others, she was now fighting with her false image which had appeared from the huge cylindrical ice pillar in the middle of the vast space.

Ever since the whispers started back inside the great labyrinth, Kaori had been feeling as though she was being dragged little by little into a bottomless swamp.

She had to fight while being relentlessly shown the filthy and ugly parts residing deep within her heart. Originally, since she was jealous of Yue and had an inferiority complex to the point even she was aware of how bad it was, she had ample negative emotions. Therefore, the words spoken by her false image

struck her and hollowed out her weak parts with more efficiency than a sharp knife and more accuracy than Hajime's bullets.

It had been thirty minutes since the start of the battle. Kaori's heart was already badly hurt even though she wasn't hurt that much physically. If her heart could appear as a physical object, it would definitely be in a tattered state, bleeding large amounts of blood, and squeaking in pain.

However, even so, Kaori never flinched. Her inferiority complex, fretfulness, and jealousy were already tested back in the Merujiine Underwater Ruin and she managed to pull through. Of course, she wasn't able to completely come to terms with her weaknesses since it was a problem stemming from her heart, and Yue was part of that problem.

Rather, when Shia's love was accepted by Hajime, she felt intense envy and rage in her innermost thoughts, and would also feel it unintentionally every time Shia would approach Hajime while putting on a lovely face.

However, it was also true that she felt blessed. She wasn't only caught in fretfulness, jealousy, or her inferiority complex. She wasn't only belittling herself and overworking herself in an effort to make up for it. On the contrary, she was also rejoicing at this proof which meant it was possible for women other than Yue to be acknowledged by Hajime.

She had grown. Instead of envying someone else in silence, she would now take a step forward towards granting her own wish. Which is why she couldn't afford to lose to the image of herself standing before her eyes.

"YaAAAAAAAAA!"

"The speed increased yet again, huh?"

Each time she was wounded by the words fired at her like arrows, her own power would go up little by little. It was proof she was slowly learning how to use Nointo's abilities as if she was untying scrolls one by one.

At the same time, she felt as though her false image which had taken the form of a gray Nointo was starting to weaken.

While being assailed, wounded, and made to suffer by her own filthy self, she was able to take it all in, swallow the pain and turn it into power she could use. She was showing a righteous, reliable, and splendid growth. Thanks to sublimation magic, her mastery of the twin silver longswords had almost reached the level of the original Nointo who fought with Hajime.

Then again, the organ which made it possible to receive an infinite amount of magical power was missing, but by using sublimation magic, she succeeded in artificially increasing her body specs to the point she broke through all limits.

Now, Kaori and her false image both took out their high-speed swords fluently while creating afterimages. It seemed this trial had made Kaori grow up after putting her through suffering and pain.

"I won't lose! I'll become a good woman who will lose to neither Yue nor Shia and I'll get Hajime-kun to look at me! I'll protect the people I want to protect, and return with everyone to Japan!"

“… It doesn’t look like I can break you with words anymore… fine. Come at me with all your strength! Cut me, your weakness!”

The battle was getting to its most interesting part. Locking sword to sword and pushing, they were staring each other down with contrastive pupils as the twin large swords illuminated them with silver light. Kaori’s pupils blazed with determination while the pupils of her opponent were as calm as the surface of the water in a peaceful lake.

Incidentally, the fact that Tio was not included in her declaration was merely due to inattention.

Then, intuitively they understood that things would be settled in the next move after they broke the sword lock. They both simultaneously tried to repel the opponent’s twin swords. At that time…

“ZuDooOOOOOOO!”

The terrific sound of an explosion echoed through the chamber.

“Fue!?”

“Wh-What!?”

Still engaged in a sword lock, they were dumbfounded at the sudden disturbance. Their eyes were wide open in astonishment at the shapes which emerged before them from the flames caused by the explosion in the wall. Standing before them were Shia, whose usamimis were fluttering, and Yue.

Furthermore…

“Saa, Yue-san! If you don’t want to end up completely beaten up, hurry up and apologize!”

Kaori stood open-mouthed with a silly expression while looking at Shia who made a declaration of war and thrust Doryukken at Yue.

Things had been going very slowly so far, and now that it was finally the long awaited time for the climax, they were suddenly interrupted by the affairs of other people.

Kaori and her false image were exchanging glances while engaged in the deadlock. Then, seemingly having understood each other’s thoughts, they nodded to each other. Kaori strengthened her resolve and raised her voice towards Yue and Shia who were confronting each other.

“Ah, Ano, Yue? Shia? What in the world are-”

“… Shia. Think about the worst-case scenario.”

“Shut up! My beloved Yue wouldn’t say such a cowardly thing! The ‘special one’ Hajime-san fell in love with wouldn’t give up! What about a worst-case scenario? What would you do if I wasn’t here to knock some sense into you? You coward! You old shorty! You have neither small nor big breasts, you only have a fragment of breasts!”

“… You’re saying things you shouldn’t. Shia, you’re getting far over yourself.”

Kaori was completely ignored. Neither Yue nor Shia had shifted their gaze one bit away from the other. The edge of Kaori’s eyes were gleaming. False Kaori patted her shoulders in sympathy.

At one point, Shia had heated up to the extent she couldn't restrain herself and started using abusive language against Yue. Then Yue's words were spoken in a way that implied she might no longer have a future, which gave Shia a stomachache.

As expected, being criticized this much by Shia left even Yue questioning herself a little.

However, maybe she was mistaken about the memories she recalled so far. Maybe the man she trusted the most before being sealed was actually reluctant to seal her. The reason why was a complete mystery. She couldn't dismiss the feeling he might have wanted to leave words behind before parting.

Why did Shia not understand? It was Shia after all, in whom she had great trust. So why did she deny her feelings after hearing them? Yue was getting frustrated.

Although Yue's feelings made her fairly tolerant towards Shia, that tolerance was blown away in one go with the words Shia used.

A vein appeared on Yue's forehead.

On top of that, Shia mentioned Yue's breasts, putting emphasis on her own pair of melons. She was shaking Yue like a jelly with the intent to provoke her.

The remarks which were made on her were a bit too difficult to turn a blind eye to. The dark clouds beginning to form over Yue's head attested to it. That was the residence of Yue's specialty, 'Thunder Dragon'. 'GoRoGoRo', the well-known roar of thunder resounded.

"… Now is your chance to back down, you deplorable rabbit."

"That's my line, you thousand-year-old shorty."

Distinctive marks of anger rose to the surface of their respective foreheads.

Then…

"Ah, Ano, You two? Let's calm down a little? I don't know what happ-"

"… I'll turn you into a roasted rabbit and teach you the difference in our strengths."

"Ha, a cowardly shorty with small breasts is no match for me! Today will be remembered as day of the underdog for sure!" [1]

From the dark clouds above Yue, the thunder dragon sprang at Shia with a roar. Shia brandished Doryukken and leaped forward with a war cry.

"*Sob* As I thought, I'm useless… …"

"A, Are!? My strength is increasing somehow!? N-, Not good! Pull yourself together!"

"… As I thought, I'm no good…"

"Ah, no, that's not correct. You're not useless! It's just that those two have overheated and can't see the surroundings."

For some reason, false Kaori which should have been made from her negative emotions was comforting Kaori who had been totally ignored and was now on the verge of tears, scratching her contorted face. As expected, it seems even false Kaori couldn't contain her sympathy when she saw her real form being ignored by Yue and Shia.

With a backward glance, they could see the first big argument between Yue and Shia was getting even worse.

"Reflect a little on what you're saying! You horny granny!"

"Ts,… You're the one who's horny with your useless tits. You perverted rabbit!"

"Ho, Could it be you're jealous, Flat-chested-san?"

"… You damn peeing rabbit. You can't control yourself once more."

"Ugh, just when did this story you're bringing up happen! That's cheap! You 'Rounding measurements, isn't it completely flat? In fact, isn't it better like this, as a chopping board?' woman!"

"… Long! Rather, don't go around deciding my breasts mea… I'm not flat-chested! My breasts are decent! You saggy-chested rabbit!"

"M- my breasts aren't saggy! They're just bouncing a little! And Hajime-san likes them a lot!"

Let's make a revision. Rather than worsening, it seems the argument was getting increasingly childish.

"… Hajime has no interest in worthless meat. He prefers buttocks! Especially the contour from the bottom to the thighs! And he said mine was the best!"

"Th- then I will simply be the oppai master! With my breasts Yue-san can never hope to match, I already did "Pi-", "Pi-" and "Pi-"! And he was having a great time with them! Even for the contests at night, the underdog is drawing near!"

And thus, Hajime's sexual inclinations were nonchalantly being spoken of.

If Hajime had been here just now, he would have been the one getting hurt.

"… I'm the one who taught Hajime night skills. I'm also the one who taught Shia combat skills. I know everything! I'll show you that no disciple can hope to defeat the master!"

"Bring it on! The disciple will surpass the master! Be it at night or during the day! Today, right here!"

Shia poured magic into Doryukken and used it to hit the 'Thunder Dragon'. For a moment, the shape of 'Thunder Dragon' was completely smashed, however, it immediately reformed itself and opened its jaws wide in an attempt to swallow Shia.

But Shia, with breathtaking speed, had already slipped past the 'Thunder Dragon' and was closing in on Yue.

Yue intercepted her by summoning a space barrier using space magic. Moreover, she tried to use the resulting shockwave to blow Yue away.

However, using sublimation magic to increase her physical strength twofold, Shia withstood the shock wave with unbelievable physical resistance.

Sublimation magic was a magic that enhanced the level of everything.

Naturally, since it depended on the quantity of magical power used, the enhancement only lasted while sublimation magic was active, and being an age of gods magic, its consumption of magical power was overwhelming.

Still, it was obvious that the effect granted by this magic was tremendous, and now the physical strength of Shia who was using it had surpassed Hajime's non-strengthened physical strength. A half-hearted attack wouldn't even leave a single trace on that body.

"How soft! It's going to take much more than that to stop me!"

"… You cheat character! Hurry up and go down!"

There was the booming sound of an explosion, the ice walls, and the ground's surface was breaking, and ice shards were flying around. Flames were scattering in the air as the thunder scorched everything in its path. Then a shock wave ran through the entire place and the sound of another explosion followed as magic was being unleashed over and over again all over the place.

Yue and Shia's high level of commitment could be seen through the high-level battle which was getting increasingly violent, in contrast to their earlier argument which had steadily become childish.

"Yue-san no… etto, eto, baaka, baaka!"

"… Shia no… Shia no… Ahou~!"

It seemed they had used up all the insults they knew.

In the corner of the room, Kaori and her false image, who should originally have been the protagonists here, were sitting on the floor grasping their knees. Their faces blank, they were watching the huge fight between the childish Yue and Shia who didn't seem to comprehend that battles were lethal.

To think that Kaori and her opponent had reached the point of climax, and as Kaori was about to clear the trial, she was suddenly interrupted by this battle… Only to hear words such as 'baka' or 'ahou'. The scene before her was really idiotic. You couldn't reproach her for her vacant stare.

"… I'm going."

"… Don't tell me, are you intending to go and try to stop them!? You can't, you'll die!"

False Kaori suddenly stood up from her sitting position. And then she said she was heading to the battlefield. Her face was so transparent it was hard to think she had been formed from negative emotions. As if she had just learned the time of her death.

"This room is meant for our trial. It should not be devastated by outsiders. That's why I'm going. For both my sake and yours, your sake and mine."

"… You…"

The newfound absurd friendship which had developed between them… maybe the crazy development had set a screw loose in their heads.

"… Make sure to come back. Without fail, safely. I'll be waiting!"

"Fufu, if you tell me that, I have to make sure to come back."

They took each other's hands. It really looked like a scene from a film where a woman was seeing off her lover headed to the battlefield after making an oath to see each other again. Their emotional limit may have been reached in various ways.

False Kaori reluctantly parted her hands from Kaori, turned around, and glared at the two cheat characters with a resolute expression.

Then…

"Shirasaki Kaori, a false image of the trial, I'm off!"

"Please, please, be safe!"

She stepped into the storm of destruction brought about by high-level magic that defied common sense and cheat physical stats.

Immediately after…

"You're in the way!" X2

"KyaAAAAAAAAAA!?"

With a swift attack, she was dancing in the air. The trajectory was a beautiful parabola.

"I- you, I mean, me!"

"Ku, I- I'm fine! I can still do it! I'll definitely show you I can stop them!"

Receiving lightning and a shock wave, the now stained false Kaori flapped her silver wings to rearrange her stance and showed her fighting spirit like a hero. What in the world is making her willing to go to such lengths… In all likelihood, the unfolding situation must have driven her crazy. Because the origin was Kaori.

False Kaori glared at Yue and Shia and shouted with all her strength.

"You two, Cut it out! This is our place! Don't disturb our trial!"

However…

ZuDoOON!

BaKi! GoGaaAN!

That brave voice was entirely engulfed by the noise of the battle. Neither Yue nor Shia gave her a single glance. They were only seeing each other and had taken absolutely no notice of her whatsoever.

A vein appeared on the forehead of false Kaori. Barging into other people's room of their own accord, and doing as they pleased as if they were in their own room. Seeing such a scene made her irritated to no end.

"Wh- Why you, then you leave me no choice but to use force! I won't be taking complaints afterward!"

Flapping her silver wings mightily and leaving three afterimages of herself, she rushed towards Yue and Shia at high speed. She was aiming to attack with her twin swords. Of course, she did not intend to use the sharp edge of her swords but the flat side to try to knock them out.

First, she would target Shia who had been thrown into the ground by Yue's 'Cursed Sky'[2]. She would quickly move behind her and hit the back of her head.

"You're mine! Flash of punishment!"

"Aa? Annoying!"

However, voicing her irritation with a voice just like Hajime's, Shia turned around and easily stopped the sneak attack false Kaori thought to have succeeded. Barehanded, and with one hand at that. What was even more strange was that even though the flat side of the sword was directed at Shia, she had somehow caught the sharp side of the sword with her fingertips. In other words, she had not stopped the high-speed blow from the large sword from the front but pinched it from the side.

"Eeeh!? Th- That can't be!?"

Shia clicked her tongue at the trembling false Kaori and suddenly pulled the large sword. As false Kaori was pulled forward, Shia seized her neck while taking a throwing stance.

"HauUUUU!"

She was flung away in one go.

Even though it was a beautiful throw describing a parabola, it was not meant to move her out of the danger or the battlefield, instead, she had been thrown with terrific strength like a bullet. Towards Yue.

That is to say, she had just been used against Yue as a human bullet.

As false Kaori's scream echoed all over the place, Yue who faced her uttered the following words.

"Thunder Dragon, eat up!"

She was attacked from the front by the thunder dragon. The jaws of the sparkling thunder dragon opened wide in wait for her flying form.

"Hiii!?"

Screaming, false Kaori wrapped herself up in her silver wings. Then, she used her silver magical power to summon her decomposition ability at its maximum power.

BOHA! The thunder dragon's shape dispersed.

Shia who was hiding behind gave pursuit. It seemed she was expecting this outcome before she threw false Kaori. An improvised shield, one could say. It was an extremely savage deed.

Yue's defense, thunder dragon, had been successfully penetrated. However, she used a gravity ball of 'Cursed Sky' to create a high-gravity field on the front.

As a result…

"HeuUUUUU!?"

False Kaori who was still flying was suddenly and forcefully pulled to the ground and slid face down.

What a miserable sight. If Shizuku was here, there's no mistake she would be furious, even if she knew it was a false image.

Collapsed, face down on the ground, false Kaori moaned a weak 'Uu, Uu' as she struggled to get up in some way or another. Then, the moment she raised her struggling face…

"Mugyuu!?"

Her face was trampled down by Shia who had come in pursuit. She was made to kiss the ground once more. Too pitiful a sight.

Shia's Doryukken weight was increased many fold and dropped onto the ground. Debris was sent flying, incidentally taking false Kaori along. One could easily guess what was shining along with the ice shards fluttering about in the air and which had for origin the area near false Kaori's eyes…

Without a single care about her, Yue and Shia entered the climax of their battle. Both of them were in a tattered state and showing an unladylike display.

Yue was healed with her 'Automatic Regeneration'. Shia changed into superwoman mode and was fine thanks to her physical ability and regeneration magic. However, they were breathing roughly due to their consumption of magic. The fact that they weren't using their demon crystal stones to replenish their magical power was just due to their stubbornness.

"Yue-san no…"

"Shia no…"

Yue summoned an extra-large 'Thunder Dragon'. It took the shape of a huge arm in the sky and shot forward. Shia created a huge kendama, loaded it with magical power and shot it using Doryukken. They both released an unusual pressure.

And, therein, false Kaori was flapping her wings and flying unsteadily… her eyes lost focus.

Maybe she had not yet recovered from the previous shock.

"Get away—! You, I, get away quickly -!"

"Fue?"

Kaori used both hands as a megaphone to amplify her voice and issue a warning. But, as expected, false Kaori who was barely conscious only gave a dull response.

After which…

“Blockhead!” X2

The thunderous lightning and the red kendama collided in the center, bringing about fierce destruction.

“—!?”

The poor recovering victim who had been silent screamed. Jostled in the air from the white smoke, the victim was sent flying towards Kaori.

Bouncing off the ground several times, she continued rolling on the ground until she ended her course before Kaori. What a cruel fate. There was a certain charm to how she was coughing up white smoke, though.

“Su- Such cruelty…”

“Sorry, my other self. I couldn’t win against the cheat and bugged characters.”

Embracing her worn-out other self who was lying on the ground, tears formed in Kaori’s eyes. False Kaori gave her a faint smile.

“Uun. You tried hard. That alone is enough.”

“… My other self…”

There was a nice feel between the two, but they were the same person, after all, putting aside the fact that the aim of the great labyrinth was to play with the core of one’s feelings.

A threat suddenly appeared above the two who were cuddling close together, ready to deliver the final blow. ‘Bikiriii-’. An unpleasant sound reached their ears as a huge lump of ice began collapsing. Yes, that was the aftermath of the battle. The huge central pillar that supported the ceiling had been smashed and was crumbling, causing, in turn, the surrounding ceiling to collapse as well. And both Kaoris were right below.

“Run away! I’ll be fine!”

“Sonna! I can’t do that! At this rate!”

As expected, the development had become drama-like for both of them. False Kaori who had no way of dealing with the incoming danger was pushing aside Kaori in an attempt to let her escape the danger.

Kaori, with an extremely saddened face, refused to go. It would have been simply fine for Kaori to carry false Kaori in her arms away from the danger, but she was too thoughtless at the moment to notice.

The impact was imminent. The ceiling, as well as countless icicles, were close, and the next moment they would…

“Quickly!”

“Uu, Un. Understood. Sorry.”

As false Kaori was urging her on, a large sword was thrust at false Kaori’s chest. Along with Kaori’s sweet voice.

“… Eh? Why?”

Naturally, it was Kaori who did the stabbing, making a seemingly displeased expression as she averted her eyes. She answered false Kaori’s unintentional question with a pained face.

“Be, because if your death is caused by something else, maybe I will fail the trial… So before you die, I have to be the one to kill you.”

It was actually a fair argument. Actually what was up with the cheap drama-like conversation so far?

Thinking back, saying things like ‘Come back safely!’, yelling ‘Run away!’, objecting ‘I can’t leave you like this!’. Considering she was up against the voice inside her heart, maybe it could be said she had really been soft from the beginning. Before the disappearing false Kaori, Kaori’s expression was better left undescribed.

“Fufu, you became tough, me. I’m happy about your growth… However, I think this way of ending things was a little excessive.”

The icicles and the ceiling which had been seconds away from crashing started quickly going back to their former place and reforming due to the maze’s restoration function. It was obvious this would happen, just like it always had before.

Moved to tears, false Kaori, whose every effort had been fruitless up until Kaori’s last decision at the end, finally collapsed and disappeared without leaving any trace.

“… This victory feels empty.”

If someone was here, they would probably retort ‘Look who’s talking’. It seemed even Kaori had been fairly influenced by Hajime’s group.

On the other side, Yue and Shia who had mutually met each other’s strongest attacks were panting.

“Haa, Haa…, keho.”

“Fuhe, Fuhe…”

They were breathing roughly while standing on the ground of ice with similar postures. Their magical reserves were running completely dry.

“Don’t say such sad things.”

“…”

“If something’s bothering you, let’s smash it together.”

“…”

“No matter what we’re up against, no matter the situation, we won’t lose. Together, we can do anything. That’s what I believe.”

Shia was reiterating her last speech with a rough breath. Yue, similarly breathing roughly, was listening silently.

“The ones who taught me that are Yue-san and Hajime-san, right? Right now, you aren’t being the same person who taught me that. I absolutely won’t acknowledge a Yue-san who is afraid of some future and silently gives up.”

Shia’s acknowledged beloved ‘special one’ was a person who would not give up under any circumstances and would rely on her and her power to peep into the future. Which is why there was no way she could approve of the current Yue. Not only could she not approve of Yue’s statement, but also of the way things were.

She didn’t know what exactly inside Yue made her pronounce the words ‘in the worst case scenario’, but if there is a chance such a thing will happen, they should not be making an excuse for it but preparing for it instead. Even if her comrades, her family, her friends, and the lover she ought to love were to get involved in the process, they should still be trying to seize the future in which they are all together. The idea of people close to Hajime intending self-sacrifice was unthinkable. Even if it sealed their fate, staying, eating and drinking together until the end, and then perishing together would still be ten thousand times better.

Of course, for her, their probability of perishing was so low she wouldn’t even give it a thought. If Hajime were here and had time to worry about such a thing, he would probably be searching for a way to kill the absurdity instead. Not even one millisecond before his death would he release his boiling killing intent.

And, Yue should be the first one to know that.

“Such a foolish request, you think I’ll listen to it?”

“Shia…”

By now Shia was shedding tears. Irritated by Yue who was mentioning the possibility of no longer being with them, she couldn’t help but imagine this future which saddened her …

She thought that if she beat Yue in this fight that had started as easily as a child losing his temper, she would be able to prove that she had become strong enough to protect Yue and thus blow away Yue’s lack of resolve. But as expected, Yue was strong, and victory was not possible. This fact was disappointing and annoying for Shia…

Shia’s various mixed feelings piled up and saturated. Unable to contain herself anymore, her emotions turned into tears that started overflowing.

Lying on the ground, Yue, who had only managed to turn her sight to Shia in order to watch her, summoned magical power from her demon crystal stone and used restoration magic, before getting up slowly. Then she started crawling towards Shia on all fours.

“… Shia, sorry.”

“Yue-san?”

Looking from above at Shia’s face, out of which tears and a dripping nose particularly stood out, Yue gently stroked her head. With both her gaze and hands, and in an extremely gentle way. Shia managed to stare back despite her field of vision being reduced by her tears.

"… It's as Shia says. No matter the past, no matter who I am, it doesn't matter. From now on, I want to remain all the time by Hajime and Shia's side. So I will send flying anyone who stands in the way of that, no matter who it is. That is all there is to it."

"Highu, Th- That's right."

"… Nn. Even if something happens to me, Hajime and Shia will definitely do something about it. There was nothing to worry about."

"Isn't that obvious, uh."

"… Nn. Sorry. I made an awful request. Will you forgive me?"

"I'll forgive you! So, don't you dare make such a sad request again! Promise me!"

"… Nn. I promise."

Sweetly wiping the sweat from Shia's face, Yue lifted her in her arms. Shia tightly clung to Yue. Yue also hugged Shia back tightly.

Time was flowing silently. Things had become peaceful as they were stroking each other's skin gently.

Yue and Shia had had their first big fight. It was a scene like that of friends having a fist fight by a river beach and watching the sunset after making up as their mutual bond grew even stronger.

A quivering voice reached them.

"… Thank goodness. I really don't understand what's going on anymore, but thank goodness."

"?" X2

Puzzled, Yue and Shia turned their sight to the source of the voice. They saw Kaori's smile as her cheeks were twitching. Although, due to her promise, her eyes weren't smiling at all.

"Ufufu, I'm speechless. There was no consideration whatsoever for me. Going completely crazy and throwing my trial into a complete mess, to the point it was almost ruined, and not even having a care in the world. Rather, giving me this 'Huh, you were here?' look, ufufu."

In response to Kaori's suspicious laughter, Yue and Shia who were still embracing each other exchanged glances. And, at that moment, they remembered. When they were in the middle of their fight, there was something they kept blowing away, trampling down and detonating …

Then, realizing that this was the large room for Kaori, their expression made an 'Oops' face.

"A~ E~tto, Kaori-san? For now, let's calm down?"

"Ahaha, you're saying something funny, Shia-ttara. Don't I look perfectly calm?"

… Kaori, the … how about the trial?"

"Nn~? I more or less passed it. By myself."

Yue and Shia breathed a sigh of relief.

As one would expect, involving her into their fight and leaving her unable to clear the trial, taking into account all the hardships faced so far, would have been beyond forgivable.

However, they froze in place when they heard Kaori's next words.

"Yes, I defeated her with my own hands. … After she got beaten up by you two very badly and was in a hopeless situation."

"… " X2

"That counts as a win, right? I won't be told it's invalid because she was already done in by you two first, right? What do you think about this? Huh?"

Yue and Shia were dripping cold sweat. Kaori came close to the two who were sitting down and embracing each other. She crouched with a friendly smile. Placing her chin on her knee, her gesture had a certain charm to it, but because her eyes were devoid of color, she appeared rather scary.

Then, Yue suddenly looked the other way and added oil to the fire.

"… Then, it would have been better to use restoration magic on her before finishing her off."

"… Yue?"

"… It's not my fault. Rather, it's Kaori's, who did her in too quickly."

"Hawawawa, hawawawa. Yu- Yue-san, that's a bit … Hum, Kaori-san, really, sorr—"

"Fufuu, Yue-ttara, you're funny. After completely beating her up and sending her flying, to say such a thing … hey, raise your friendship level with me too."

Kaori, who had kept sinking ever deeper from the start, kept her smiling face as a vein popped on her forehead and she extracted her twin large swords.

Seeing this, Yue quietly stood up and showed a fearless smile as she answered with all her strength.

"… I don't mind. A friendship where I am above Kaori and Kaori is under me, I will raise the level of such a friendship."

"Ufufufufufuu, get blown away!"

"… I refuse!"

Then, flashes ran through the large room that had barely finished recovering from the last intense fight, and thunderous roars were once again heard.

"Fueeeen, Yue-san! Kaori-san! If I may ask, please stop!"

This time, Shia was attempting to calm both sides. The new passage that made its appearance felt somehow like the reward of futile efforts.

1: They use the word Gekokujō. From the Translator: Japanese term roughly translated as the lower rules the higher or the low overcomes the high, source: jisho.org. In our case, juniors (Shia) dominating seniors (Yue).

2: TL: As a reminder, it's her gravity magic.

Chapter 146 – Thank God, She is a Pervert as Expected

—Even though you actually noticed.

Those words had been whispered into Suzu's ear since she first entered the great labyrinth. And right now, those words were thrown at her from her reddish-black eyed self whose entire body color was white.

Each time she heard those words, Suzu's heart creaked grindingly as though it was compressed by a pressing machine. That was just natural. Because recognizing these facts for Suzu was the same as recognizing her sin.

The false image of Suzu which was created from her negative emotion thrust the truth at her.

The voice referred to how Suzu had faintly noticed Eri's true nature.

If others were asked about their impression toward Nakamura Eri, ten of ten would surely answer like this:

She is meek and reserved, a girl that is able to take a step back and observe the whole objectively. Usually, she refrains from meddling, but she is someone prudent that can say out her opinion with skillful consideration when it counts and that can nonchalantly give help. Her figure following behind with a smile is like a Yamato Nadeshiko.

There was also various other opinions, but in general, people harbored an impression that she had a gentle and good-willed personality. Kouki and company were also similar. Even Shizuku with her sharp observations had almost the exact same impression. For that reason, that day, when Eri exposed her true nature, Shizuku was also greatly shocked.

Among those people, only Suzu harbored a slightly different impression.

Suzu thought that Eri might be a slightly calculating girl. She understood her best friend's conceit the best, because she was always looking at her from the side, and also because the girl named Taniguchi Suzu was special. She was sensitive toward the subtleties of human's emotion.

Suzu noticed that inside Eri's smiling eyes, sometimes, there was coldness and sharpness that resided there. And then she noticed how Eri was usually a step behind. Rather than calling that something natural from her personality, it was something that came from the logic. It was more convenient to collect information assertively in that position, Suzu somehow understood that kind of thing too.

But she had never pointed that out to Eri herself. Suzu didn't think that such a behavior was unpleasant. If she was asked why, it was because when Eri gathered information like that while changing her gestures or words, generally, she was doing it for the sake of someone else.

And then, even at this time that couldn't be considered ordinary, Suzu guessed that the way Eri did a thing, her speech and her conduct were for the sake of protecting her own mind and body.

Suzu didn't reject the idea of acting a part for the sake of protecting one's own heart and body. If asked why, it was because it would be like rejecting herself.

What was the meaning of that? To understand that, there is a need to know about Suzu's early life.

Both of Suzu's parents were workaholics right to their core. From morning until evening, it was only work, work, work… Since her childhood, it was as though Suzu was raised by the employed caretaker. Both her parents didn't even attend the custom events like visitation day or child and parent day.

Her family was quite prosperous, but after her caretaker went home, Suzu was always left alone inside the spacious house. If a young child was left alone for a long time, it was inevitable for them to become gloomy. When Suzu was in kindergarten and the early elementary school grades, she was a moody child without any friends.

It wasn't like she wasn't loved by her parents or anything. They carefully considered anything that they gifted Suzu. Suzu also knew that when they went home late at night, they secretly came to look at Suzu's condition and stroke her head.

But, for the young Suzu, all that was not enough at all… that was why, with the sulking feeling she was cold toward her parents when she occasionally met them, she took an attitude that wasn't cute at all; she pretended to sleep when she was actually awake…

For such a Suzu to turn out like the current cheerfully simple girl was solely thanks to the influence of her caretaker. A few years passed since she was employed, the caretaker couldn't bear to look at the moping Suzu, so the large-bodied caretaker auntie gave advice to Suzu.

That advice was, 'Anyway, just laugh', truly advice that was overflowing with vagueness. 'With that your surrounding will change', she said. Those were the words of the caretaker that even now was still working in Suzu's house, who for Suzu was like another mother already. For Suzu of that time, she didn't understand what the caretaker meant, but if by doing that she wouldn't be lonely then she thought there was no harm in doing it.

First, she tried to show upfront happiness towards her parents. She smiled widely, she jumped at them, she got her head stroked, and when she received present, she expressed happiness with her all. Actually, there was still lurking feelings in her heart, but she tried to come into contact with her parents while repressing it. Thereupon the faces of Suzu's parents turned 'dere', it was a face so slovenly that Suzu had never seen it at all until that time.

They are still constantly busy with their work without any change, but even so, each time her parents looked at her she could see them smiling happily. Those smiling faces also become something that made Suzu happy.

Next, she also smiled cheerfully in the school. In truth, there was nothing that was really fun or anything there, even so, she constantly floated a wide smile.

Thereupon, before she realized it there was always someone in Suzu's surroundings. Someone would always talk joyfully with a smile at Suzu. When she saw that, her school life until now became like a lie and it changed into something fun.

With that, Suzu understood. Even if she was sad or pained, if she made a smile, it would attract other smiles. With that, she wouldn't be alone anymore.

Because of that, so that she wouldn't be alone again, Suzu would smile without end no matter what kind of time it was. Yes, no matter what kind of time it was.

Suzu's smiling face wasn't something that always came from her heart. Rather, about half of her smiles were faked. She was doing it for so long that her true smile and the fake smile became the same and couldn't be differentiated from each other.

That was why while Suzu noticed the calculating personality of Eri that put on the mask of Yamato Nadeshiko to protect her body and heart just like Suzu, she didn't think of that as unpleasant. Rather she felt sympathy to Eri. After she noticed, she associated with her even deeper.

She thought that what Eri did was the same as her. She also thought that Eri felt sympathy for Suzu who was living by acting. She thought that even though it was true that Eri was calculating for the sake of herself, that they were really friends, even best friends. And then, she also thought that toward someone who didn't have the intention to harm her, Eri would properly hold a good will towards them.

No, perhaps it should be said that she wanted to believe it to be so.

She left alone the unease that was bloating in her since they arrived in this world. She didn't try to notice the thing that should be noticed. She gave up putting the effort because she feared to step into the calculating heart of Eri, who had taken off her smiling mask. She feared that the pleasant relationship they had until now would end and that Eri's malice that Suzu perhaps had faintly realized would be shoved into her face.

That was why she believed. She believed blindly. She stuffed the unease she held, the anxiety she felt, into the bottom of her chest. She convinced herself that there was no malice or anything in Eri, that even her calculating aspect was always for the sake of her best friend Suzu and for Kouki and the others who were her comrades.

And the result…

{The tragedy of that day occurred. Two of Suzu's classmates were lost. A lot of knights including Meld-san died. if Nagumo-kun and others weren't there, then Kaori would have also died. Even though it was only Suzu who since coming in this world had faintly noticed Eri's character and could stop the tragedy of that day, Suzu averted her eyes from reality because Suzu treasured herself. Suzu sealed everything so deep in the bottom of her heart that she didn't even realize it herself. Pasting a smile on the face, just like usual…}

"…"

The darkness in Suzu's heart. That was a fierce guilt. Even though it was only her who could stop Eri's crime, she neglected that by denying the reality that Eri would do anything bad. As a result, a lot of people died, and her classmates were also almost annihilated.

If she just nonchalantly consulted with Shizuku, perhaps something would have changed. The regret of not doing that had been whirling fiercely in Suzu's heart since that day.

{While declaring that Suzu is her best friend, Suzu didn't notice the distortion of her heart. If it was Suzu, if it was Suzu who had been together with Eri longer than anyone. She should have been able to notice it, yet… by stepping into her heart, perhaps it would also exposed the fakeness of Suzu's own smile… Suzu feared that so she didn't do anything… Hearing the words 'best friend' from you feels really astonishing.}

"…"

{Do you think that everything would be fine if you just put on a smile? Even though it was just a widely thin relation where your hearts didn't connect with each other, did you think that you are actually not alone? Just like Eri said, what open stupidity, isn't it?}

Suzu wordlessly swept her iron fan. Dozens of barriers that she deployed cut through the wind and rushed the false image, surrounding it. Instantly, magic power exploded inside the containment, the explosion that was like an improvised frag grenade striking the white Suzu.

The surrounding ground was blown away, ice fragments were dancing in the air sparklingly, and perhaps it was only expected, the false image appeared unharmed wrapped in shining barrier while she was unfolding her white iron fan, hiding half her face.

Since the battle started, this development had been repeated all along. Suzu's attack couldn't break through the white Suzu's protection no matter what. And then, the false image that hardened her defense mercilessly tore apart Suzu with blades of words one-sidedly.

{What are you going to do after meeting Eri one more time? Even though you actually don't know what you want to say when you meet her, even though you are thinking that you will only get hostility and scorn directed at you without question anyway.}

Not only the past, the white Suzu also turned the matter of the future into a blade to swing at Suzu.

Not doing what she should do… averting her eyes from reality, tricking herself, the guilt of letting many people die, the regret of not trying to step into that distortion even while calling herself the best friend, although her feeling of wanting to meet was true, actually, she still didn't know what she wanted to do when she actually meets her. She felt anxiety and fretfulness as though she was wandering inside a thick mist.

The heart of Suzu was creaking, it was torn apart, bleeding from the thorough torment, reaching its limit… was how it should be…

{Even after saying this much, Suzu is not really getting stronger, huh. Even though at first you turned weak from what Suzu was saying. Even though you just denied it, if you only averted your eyes, Suzu can get stronger…}

"As Suzu thought, there is really that kind of rule. If that's the case, then no matter what you are saying, you won't be able to get stronger."

{It looks like it. In the middle, your heart began to gain determination little by little. Suzu's words, on the contrary, became your strength to look back at yourself.}

While facing the white Suzu that was shaking her head as though to say 'good grief', Suzu was breathing hard, her hands that were grasping her iron fans were trembling, even so, she opened her mouth to speak with a dignified tone.

"… Yes. Even though it's about Suzu herself, but the more it was showed to Suzu, it felt really painful, agonizing. But, what you are saying is all true? That's why it's fine already. It's enough already standing still for the sake of Suzu herself. In the first place, since Suzu saw the dream at Haltina's Great Labyrinth, Suzu had come to understand just how much Suzu averted her eyes from what is important."

{… What a convenient dream that is.}

The white Suzu laughed. But, Suzu also laughed. That wasn't a fake laugh, it was a laugh filled with bitterness and pain that came from her heart.

"Suzu should be able to get it. That world of dreams. Only if Suzu properly accepted reality."

Suzu talked to herself with calm eyes.

"At that time, what Taeko-san said to 'just laugh', she didn't mean that it's fine if Suzu just smiles. That's not all, what Taeko-san meant is to open your own heart first if you want to connect with other people's hearts. Right now, Suzu understands."

If you wanted to make others happy, first you yourself had to be happy. Surely, there were a lot of people who had heard those words. This was the same as that.

"It's just as you said, honestly, Suzu also doesn't understand what she wants to do by meeting Eri. Does Suzu want to curse at her, blame her, apologize for averting Suzu's eyes, or to persuade her back… Suzu doesn't know."

Suzu's heart since that day, that day when it received that painful betrayal was disordered in pieces. Various emotions were overflowing like a river after a heavy rain. It was merely enduring so that it didn't flood over. Surely, the dam of Suzu's heart would break the first time she confronted Eri and would scream.

That was why…

"Suzu doesn't understand, but Suzu knows that Suzu has to meet her so…"

She wouldn't expose any unsightliness just like at Haltina's Great Labyrinth. That was conveyed implicitly to her other self.

{… Suzu's strength is lowering a little again. Looks like your resolve is the real thing.}

"That's right. This is not just words anymore. This is not seeing just a sweet dream. Suzu will surpass you and go ahead on this path! 'Gather and return—Divine Severance–Turn'!"

Suzu proclaimed with resolve in her words. And then, she swung her pair of iron fans widely.

Right after, white Suzu's surrounding shone brilliantly, the barrier was created as though in reverse regeneration.

'Divine Severance–Turn'—By using regeneration magic, this magic made use of the magic power of a barrier that had been smashed and dispersed once to create a barrier once more.

The Suzu's barriers that had been smashed until now had reached several hundred. The barriers of the white Suzu had also been smashed in great numbers. All those were regenerated and manifested for the sake of barrier burst. The total number of barriers were a hundred and fifty layers. Those barriers surrounded white Suzu like a castle wall.

{Is that is so… if it's insufficient with just your own, you even regenerate the barrier that Suzu smashed.}

"Yep. You are Suzu herself so it is not hard to regenerate it. In exchange, all of Suzu's magic power is dried away but… you are defeated!"

{Then try it. Use that power that is changed into the resolve to surpass everything!}

The barrier of the white Suzu shined. It was a challenge to just try it if she thought she could break it.

Suzu swept her iron fans powerfully. All the barrier was made to have directionality, and the spell commanded them to burst and scatter.

Right after that, the spacious room shook fiercely along with a thunderous roar. Ice fragments were raining down in sprinkles from the ceiling.

Even the caster Suzu was blown away by the great explosion and slid until the wall. And then her consciousness skipped when her back fiercely struck the ice wall. The cause was because she poured everything into the explosive power, even the little bit of her magic power that should be for defense.

She couldn't hear anything except ringing in her ears. Perhaps her eardrums were torn. She somehow managed to hold back her hazy consciousness. She directed her gaze at ground zero while fixing her shaking eyesight, somehow. The dense remains of magic power and smoke of ice fragments were clearing, at the large crater created there… there was nothing.

At the same time, the ice wall at Suzu's right side suddenly melted in one part and a new passage appeared.

Looking at that, Suzu discerned that she finally overcame the trial. Immediately her consciousness was succumbing to the damage from the shockwave and her magic power consumption.

(… It's okay to rest, isn't it… just for a little.)

Suzu whispered so inside her heart, then her consciousness was dragged into darkness.

It felt like drifting in the bottom of the gloomy water, inside such a sensation, Suzu's consciousness slightly awakened.

It felt like her body was shaking in a certain rhythm, in her hazy mind Suzu thought it was like she was in a cradle. However, heavy sounds and the warmth conveyed on her cheek making her comprehended

that it was the footsteps of a large person and their body warmth. The instant she comprehended that Suzu's consciousness rapidly rose to the surface.

"E, eh? What? How…?"

"Yoo, Suzu. You woke up?"

"Hee? Ryuutaro-kun?"

"Yeah, it's me."

For a moment, "Uwaa, kidnapping!?" Suzu thought fluttered and her body stiffened, but she somehow understood that she was carried on Ryuutaro's back and her body relaxed.

"Err, why is Ryuutaro-kun carrying Suzu on your back?"

"You see. After sending the irritating bastard flying away and passing through the path that appeared, I saw Suzu sleeping like a log at the corner of a similar room, so for the time being, let's just carry you. You didn't wake up even when I shook you, yeah as expected, there was also no way I could wake you up with wrestling moves, too."

"Yes, if you tried to wake up Suzu like that then it will be waking up to Barrier Burst for you."

For a moment, Suzu made an unpleasant expression thinking that if it was Ryuutaro, then he might really do that. Although in the end, he was able to be considerate towards the female, so perhaps this was also a growth… Suzu thought that with a relieved sigh. Previously he was a guy that would hit the back or shoulder of another hard while laughing heartily without caring of the other party's sex.

"But, so that's how it is. So that trial room is connected with everyone else then."

"Looks like it. I think ahead of this path will be the room of someone else."

"It will be great if it's Kaori or Tio-san. Suzu is still not healed here… wait, Ryuutaro-kun is somehow worn out too, right? Thank you for carrying Suzu."

Suzu expressed her gratitude brightly while settling on Ryuutaro's large back. Now that she looked, Ryuutaro's clothes were also looking quite ragged after winning a really hard fight. There was no stutter on his footsteps that moved forward ruggedly, but he looked like he received quite the damage.

"Aah, just this much ain't a big deal. It's only about five of my ribs, and also my shoulder that got dislocated and my arm was broken, that's all."

"That's not something at the level that you can just write off as 'that's all'!"

"No, no, I fixed my shoulder already. I also reinforced my arm with 'Vajra', so its fin-gebohaa!?"

"Hiiiii!! Ryuutaro-kun is vomiting out an impossible amount of blood!?"

In front of the panicked Suzu who heard Ryuutaro's unsubstantiated assertion, Ryuutaro who was about to say that he was fine became a bright red merlion. It looked like his internal organs were also considerably damaged.

Suzu hurriedly got down from Ryuutaro's back while screaming, she put a shoddy healing magic on him. She didn't have an aptitude for healing magic, so it was only a basic magic she learned for a critical time but it was better than nothing.

Faint light wrapped Ryuutaro who was mildly wiping the blood on his mouth nonchalantly as though he hadn't just vomited a large amount of blood. The effect wasn't that high because Suzu used a simplified magic circle that could be carried around, but it was possible to stop bleeding and pain and heal the little wound with that.

"Ah? It feels a little more comfortable somehow? Thanks, Suzu."

"… Listen here, Ryuutaro-kun. Why are you that calm after vomiting blood in buckets like that? Actually, you are not a human, are you? You are an idiot, aren't you?"

"That's cruel, eh. What, if it's just this much then you can make it somehow with your spirit."

"… Spirit… what a convenient word."

Suzu finished the treatment with a tired look. While she was at it, she also treated the remaining damage on her body core due to the explosive impact. Although this was only something for the peace of mind, she wanted to find Kaori or Tio quickly.

"Well, I also only just cleared the trial favorably, so I also got a little high tensioned here."

"Aa, certainly there is that. It's not like the time at Sea of Trees, we are properly fighting here… indeed, it feels joyful."

"Right?"

"Now that you mentioned it, how did Ryuutaro-kun do? You don't look like you have any worry or anything but… ah, it's fine if it's something hard to say, you know?"

Suzu nonchalantly said something cruel like "You are muscle brain, so there is no point even if you are abused verbally, right?". In a certain meaning, it seemed that she had put down a mask of hers.

On the other hand, Ryuutaro that was naturally disparaged didn't look like he particularly minded it, rather he didn't even notice it and answered indifferently.

"No, it's not anything big, so I don't mind. I was just given insults that I'm a loser bastard."

Suzu was dumbfounded hearing those words. Ryuutaro was a man that would just charge ahead even when there was danger in front of him. She had never seen him faltering back. What was the meaning of calling him a loser? Suzu tilted her head unable to imagine it.

Looking at Suzu who was like that, Ryuutaro scratched his cheek a little embarrassed while averting his eyes, before he dropped a bomb.

"Oh man, you see, since quite some time ago, I don't know what to do to approach the woman I fell in love with yeah. I didn't even confess, on top of that she was taken completely by another man to begin with… something like that."

"… That's… what to say…"

In a sense, it could be said to be a light worry. It was just as Suzu expected, perhaps even the great labyrinth was feeling something like “This guy’s negative emotion is too little, though? What can you do to torment him, I don’t get it?”

“And then, I got told something like steal the woman with brute force without reservation, various kind of unpleasant emotions were welling up in me but…”

In Ryuutaro’s case, the method of shoving the darkness in his heart to his face so he would self-destruct was pointless. It seemed that the great labyrinth tried to attack Ryuutaro by strengthening its conscious enticement to make him lose reasoning, possibly to drown his heart in desire and erase his positive emotion as his virtue.

In that way, this could be a troublesome trial with the danger of going mad. But, Ryuutaro didn’t lose his sense, and he avoided turning into an incarnation of his desire. The prime reason for that, rather than because of Ryuutaro’s mental strength it was because of…

“Realistically stealing her is impossible, anyway. There ain’t just no way. Rather it’s suicide. I’ll get killed by Nagumo, also by Yue-san, too.”

“Heh? … … … … … … … … … …. eEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEH!!?”

Suzu knew what was inside Ryuutaro’s heart from the flow of the story, because of how unexpected it was, Suzu raised a magnificently loud voice of shock after a few beats.

And then Suzu whose mouth was closing and opening while her eyes widened largely began to confirm it timidly. Ryuutaro looked away with a sullen expression, but his ears turned red so it was obvious that he was hiding his embarrassment.

“Ryu, Ryuutaro-kun, eh? Lies? Really? You liked Onee-sama?”

“Aa, what’s with you, is it really that strange for me to be in love with that person huh- “

“N, no, that’s not true at all. But, you didn’t show anything that pointed at that at all so…”

“… You, in front of those two, do you think I can show any kind of attitude like that?”

“… Ryuutaro-kun… what a pitiful…”

“Don’t pity me! You, your personality changed somewhere somehow!”

Ryuutaro howled at Suzu who was sending him a gaze as though she was looking at a pitiful thing. Her speech and conduct strangely turned straight so what he pointed out was correct. She was not just a girl who was only smiling anymore.

But right now, what was important wasn’t Suzu’s change, but the wound of Ryuutaro’s heart (lol) who kept being shown the spectacle of the woman he fell in love with flirting with another man regardless of who was watching. Indeed, in front of Hajime and Yue, there was no way he could take action as someone who fell in love with Yue. He was also made to hesitate by the atmosphere those two wafted off. His pride as a man and the obstinacy in his heart was damaged.

If he was asked what he could do, then it was to recognize it as unrequited love and make a clean break with it. In reality, that was what Ryuutaro actually did. And the great labyrinth forcefully dragged that out but…

The side he needed to steal from was just too bad. Whether it was the male side or the female side. In front of desire and whatever, there was only a definite future of helplessness. No matter how much his black emotion was stimulated telling him to steal her, what was impossible was impossible. Rather, it even made him want to explode and scold “Don’t say something absurd! Look at reality you idiot!” at the other self that was instigating him.

“Hm, but that’s really unexpected. Who would have ever thought that Ryuutaro-kun was in love with Onee-sama….?”

“It’s not really that strange, right? Even you called her ‘Onee-sama’ since that day, ain’t you?”

“Aah, so it’s like that. Yep, perhaps that is indeed not that strange.”

Suzu clapped her hands *pon* as though she was convinced of Ryuutaro’s words.

‘That day’ which Ryuutaro mentioned was the time when they were in the absolute great pinch at Orcus Great Labyrinth. Yue’s beauty and overwhelming strength trampled the enemy accompanied with a blue dragon made any watcher even feel divinity. Her imperturbable manner, her bewitching atmosphere that was in contrast with her young appearance, and the slight kindness she showed to Suzu… all of those were just too charming for a high school student, whether male or female.

Similar to how Suzu came to yearn for Yue as Onee-sama, several male students (and a part of the female students) had their heart stolen by Yue that day. Ryuutaro was just one person among that group.

“Don’t say this to the others, okay?”

“That’s, well, Suzu won’t talk. Saying that will only damage Ryuutaro-kun. Rather, isn’t it better if you didn’t tell Suzu?”

“… Certainly, that’s true but…”

“Aaa, is it something like… you want to tell someone else, just for once?”

“Ain’t you sharp? Well, something like that. It’s something like complaining, my bad.”

Looking at the wryly smiling Ryuutaro, Suzu also returned a wry smile.

“But, challenging the opponent from the front with angry feeling and turned ragged like that is unacceptable, isn’t it?”

“… That bastard’s mug was irritating. When I recalled it, it made me want to punch him flying again.”

“I think you can just use a mirror for that.”

Suzu made a complicated look at Ryuutaro who confirmed he had gone through a really strange trial, but before long the end of the road became visible ahead. It seemed that while they were talking they had reached their last stop.

“O? It’s the next room.”

“Please, Kaori or Tio-san be there…”

Suzu who wanted to ask for healing clasped her hands in prayer while approaching the ice wall. The ice wall reacted to them and melted, opening the entrance toward the room inside.

In the end… it seemed Suzu’s prayer reached.

“Kyah!?”

“Uoh!?”

The moment Suzu and Ryuutaro entered the room, the assaulting shockwave and the torrent of magic power made them reflexively scream while covering their face with their hands. And then Suzu somehow deployed a barrier, ahead of her gaze was the figure of two Tios, both of them raising one of their hands while firing black and pure white flashes at each other.

The opposing two colored flashes were clashing right from the front in the middle of Tio and the false image of Tio wearing white kimonos and hair that was white like snow. The two flashes were swallowing each other. The shockwave that trampled the room of ice was created from the collision of the two breaths.

{Fufufu, I feel it. Thy hatred and rage. The fear and resignation. No matter how many hundreds of years has passed, that tragedy that cannot be forgotten, the betrayal of the people thy protected as easy as flipping over one’s hand, the gazes of scorn and fright, the murder of thy comrades, friends, parents, the humiliation carved on their corpse.}

“…”

In the middle of the space that was dyed with white and black flashes, the false image of Tio was floating a repugnant smile while talking with a voice that was resounding with excessive clarity. That was the memory of the great persecution that erased the dragon clan from history five hundred years go. They were the strongest race of the strongest country, however, they by no means displayed arrogance. They were the greatest country that was far unrelated with the violent rule, and it was their last.

Because the dragon clan was few, the country they managed didn’t differentiate any human or demi-human, they had prosperous coexistence between various races. They protected the powerless, supported the weak, opposed when evil appeared regardless of country, hoisting morals and virtue right from the front. Such way of life was a joke, but they were undoubtedly persisting in that ideal. Besides the people of their own country, the surrounding countries even extolled the dragon clan as exactly the ‘true royalty’.

Everyone was saved and protected by the dragon clan sometime, somewhere, by some kind of reason. Everyone held respect and idolized them.

But, such days suddenly met their end.

—Dragon clan was a monster.

Such foolish thinking was spreading among the people so rapidly like a nightmare. Throughout the continent, no matter which clan you looked at, there was no race that could completely transform into another race. That overwhelming strength and the beastly appearance of complete dragonification were certainly something that blurred the boundary between human and monster.

Even so their achievement until now and their noble way of living couldn't possibly be denied. Regardless the moment such thinking was spreading, the eyes of the people changed from reverence to fear, from trust to doubt, and then from aspiration to disdain.

{O thee. At that time, it was quite an exhilarating feeling, wasn't it? Remember, that time when thou smashed the church into dust. Even that time of great persecution, the fellows who cornered us and united all the countries together against us were the church. Trampling the hateful enemy, it was an indescribable pleasure wasn't it?}

The false image talked. In the front, Tio said that she was helping up Hajime, but actually what truly made her delighted was accomplishing her own revenge. At the end of the day, for Tio Claus, rather than Nagumo Hajime's life and death, the most important thing for her was obtaining the just cause for the sake of her revenge, the false image said.

Hearing those words, Suzu and Ryuutaro that usually only knew the figure of Tio who was always frankly showing her affection to Hajime opened their eyes wide in shock and stared at Tio.

However, Tio didn't even try to protest, she was only staying quiet and kept firing her breath. It was as though she was affirming the words of her false image.

Perhaps getting into a good mood because of that, the tongue of the false image of Tio was getting increasingly smoother.

{At first, even when thou thought of going together with Nagumo Hajime, actually what thou actually thought was to 'use' him correct? The power of that man is abnormal. And then, there is no way that power won't stand out. And, in that case, the mastermind of that great persecution that unnaturally started suddenly—the god too would surely direct his attention at him. And then, just like what he did at the dragon clan who once possessed power, the god would also bare his fang at him again. When that happen, the fang of Nagumo Hajime would be directed at the god too, it might be of assistance for the killing of god, that was what thou thought.}

That was really a calculating thinking. It was a way of thinking that was even more and more distanced from the usual Tio. Suzu and Ryuutaro that listened from the side thought it was unbelievable.

However, the words that the false image of oneself talked were by no means a lie. Even if it was only something slight, even if the person themselves didn't aware of it, it was certainly an emotion that the person possessed even if by a fragment in their heart. For that reason, looking at the unknown side of Tio who was a pervert with suffering fetish but who sometimes shown gentle and intellectual aspect of her, made Suzu and Ryuutaro unable to hide their shock.

Perhaps noticing the condition of those two, Tio sent a glance at them. At her face, there was no emotion visible at all. Not even cheerfulness, or her joking smile, or her kindness, or the light of intellect, none of those were reflected there. The expression of Tio that they saw for the first time made them swallowed their breath.

{Human, demi-human, the devil, and then god. At that time, thou hate everything who stole those important for thou. But, that hatred, rage, those are something natural for thou to have. —Yes, revenge, is thy legitimate right!}

The white flash was slightly beginning to swallow the black flash. The rivalry of power began to crumble. Perhaps that was because the words of the false image were shaking the heart of Tio.

Tio remembered. Both her parents were always talking proudly and nobly. In fact, both of them fought in order to let their clan escaped, until the very end they persisted in the dignity of the dragon clan. Therefore, these feeling inside Tio that justified hatred and rage toward other people, the feeling that affirmed revenge, they were betrayal toward her parents.

The mouth of the false image of Tio distorted in a grin looking at the weakened strength of Tio while, slowly, she presented her hand that wasn't releasing the breath.

{Take my hand. If thou do that, I will enable thou to accomplish that revenge. It's fine already to not forcefully repress the hell fire smoldering inside thy heart. Thy fang of revenge won't dull because of the torment of thy conscience. I will skillfully lead Nagumo Hajime. No worry, that man too is not thinking unfavorably of me. He is a sweet man toward anyone who has entered his heart. There are so many ways to do this.}

That was a temptation. A fuel to change the flame of revenge sealed deep inside Tio's heart into a hell fire. It wasn't something to hurt Tio's heart and broke it so it could kill Tio, it was similar like with Ryuutaro's trial, it was an attack that aimed at a change of mind using temptation. It was also a trap to spur Hajime and co to kill a god by using Tio.

The momentum of the white breath was increasingly getting stronger, the black breath was getting weaker as though expressing Tio's heart. Perhaps they felt a sense of danger from that situation, Suzu and Ryuutaro were yelling "Tio-san, don't listen to that!" "Get a hold of yourself, Tio-san!" with expression colored by uneasiness.

The white flash was just about to hit. Was Tio going to be erased just like that, or perhaps she would take the hand of the false image and became a changed Tio that would make use of her comrades. In that case, it was unthinkable if Suzu and Ryuutaro that witnessed this would stay safe.

But, right now, more than the danger to themselves, the feeling of Suzu and Ryuutaro that didn't want to see the figure of Tio whose existence was a pervert but also a reliable big sister for them, falling to darkness was far stronger. Their feeling was so strong to the degree that they were thinking even if Tio wouldn't look back at them, then they would just undo the barrier and directly fought the false image.

But, at that time when it seemed that Tio would fall, suddenly a voice resounded. That was the voice of Tio who until now hadn't said even a single word.

"We, don't know the meaning of our own existence."

It was a calm voice. Rather than calling that talking, it was more like ascertaining something inside oneself.

"Is this body a beast, or man? If everything in this world has meaning then where is that answer could be."

{Those words… }

The false image noticed something and leaked out a murmur. At the same time, she noticed how the progress of the breath she fired stopped still.

“Many months and years without an answer. In that case, whether man or beast, we will hold our soul with determination.”

{-, my strength…, impossible, just what in the world, starts this—}

The black flash was moving forward. With hard effort the white was dyed by black, the stolen distance was stolen back. The false image felt how the strength inside her was weakening along with her pushed back breath. Tio should have been listening all her words all this time while staying quiet. She wasn’t unable to refute for even a single thing, a gap was made in that heart, and she was about to submit to her negative self, that was how it should be.

Despite so, without even any previous sign Tio suddenly made a comeback. While the false image was confused, sonorous words resounded clearly that it gradually even painted out the thunderous roar the breaths played out.

“The eyes of dragon see through the straight truth, destroying deceit and suspicion.”

Although it was the eyes of the beast, it wasn’t something just for the sake of making someone to fall into terror. By possessing intellect as well, it would see the truth and became something for the sake of saving someone.

“The claw of dragon tears apart the rampart of steel, crushing the nesting malice.”

If there were people to protect there, then it would crush any kind of enemy no matter what. The claw of dragon was wielded only for the sake of overthrowing evil.

“The fang of the dragon crunches one’s own weakness, washing away hatred and rage.”

It was a gigantic figure, far separated from man, exactly because of that, they had to strictly discipline themselves. If it was for that sake, then thrust that fang even to oneself. To let one’s body burned in hatred and rage, and lost one’s reasoning, was something unforgivable by oneself.

“Benevolence, at the time that is lost, we are merely a beast.”

If oneself was reduced to wielding power by merely following the emotion, injuring the innocents, let’s recognize it. Themselves were merely a beast.

But,

“Be that as it may, as long as we continue to wield the sword of reasoning—we are the dragonkin!” (TN: All this time the dragon I wrote here in the raw is written as dragon man. But I just write it as dragon because dragon man doesn’t have a nice ring for me.)

Tio opened her eyes wide together with her proclamation. Her pupil split vertically and showed her bestiality, shining brilliantly in golden color. At the same time, the invisible pressure was overflowing from Tio. It was equal to the water pressure of a grand waterfall but different with Hajime’s brutal

storm, this pressure was like when someone looked up at a sacred mountain that was far high, causing one to want to lower one's head to nature. Such coercion—if it was said strongly, then this was what one called supreme will. (TN: Or Haki, like in One Piece)

{… Don't tell me, thou. Thou were holding back?}

The false image's expression turned into the unbelieving look. That couldn't be helped. There was nothing that should trigger this, how even though Tio's mind should weaken and granted power to the false image, yet she suddenly made a comeback as if it was nothing. There was only one explanation.

Tio was controlling the weakening and strengthening of her own mind.

It wasn't something ordinary to control one's mind that it could even trick the trial of a great labyrinth. If every one of Hajime's group were all fighting cheat, then Tio could be a mental strength cheat.

"O will of great labyrinth. I thank thou. A chance to listen objectively to one's own true heart objectively cannot be found that easily. Because of the heart, is something like a vast sea, perhaps there is a gap created while I myself don't notice it and so I made use of thou but… unexpectedly, I collect quite a harvest here."

Those words caused the false image to comprehend that her assumption was correct and her expression was turning increasingly unbelieving.

{… But, there is no falsehood in what I said! There is no way thy false emotion is gone! Why I'm this easily-}

The words of the false image made Tio calmly narrowed her eyes. And then she strengthened her mind to the degree that it take away the strength of the false image right to the core.

The sleeves of her black kimono and her long smooth black hair that reached until her waist was flapping due to the torrent of magic power, while Tio was standing majestically, her figure where her hand was stretching straight ahead, was so beautiful that surely if Hajime was there, his gaze would reflexively get stolen even if Yue was right beside him.

Not even a fragment of her perversion was showing through, with her standing figure that could be mistaken as a king, Tio put her soul into her words and resounded it.

"Don't look down on me. Know just who I am."

As long as one was human, it was impossible to not have a negative emotion. What the false image said about her calculating side, her revengeful heart were certainly existing inside Tio's heart. But, if the doubt of the false image was to be answered, the answer could be seen from the proclamation of dragon clan's soul just before this. The oath that was handed down among the dragon clan was exactly the pillar that was toughly supporting Tio's mind. As long as Tio was a dragon clan, it would be her absolute core that would never break.

If she still didn't understand from that, then, Tio proclaimed with the pride and nobility of the dragon clan.

"The proud dragon—the descendant of Claus clan, Tio Claus is here!"

That was the answer. Because she was the dragon Tio Claus that she didn't break. That was all there was to it.

The false image of Tio had no words. In her expression, it looked like there was some kind of understanding, as though to say that she was beaten, she was floating a vague smile that looked like that.

Toward such false image of hers, Tio majestically gifted her last words.

"Thing like fang of revenge… is no compare to the might of the true fang of a dragon. Thou can taste it by that body of thee."

Right after that, Tio's breath pulsed, it turned thicker as though it was doubled, not tolerating even the littlest of resistance and swallowed all the white. And then, without stopping it opened a large hole in the wall of the room and dispersed.

Later there was nothing left. After giving a glance at the ice space that was immediately repaired, and the newly appeared ice passage, Tio turned on her heel without looking especially happy or moved.

Looking for the result she was unwounded. She waved the sleeve of her black kimono gracefully and elegantly brushed off the hair hanging in front of her with one hand. That tranquil atmosphere and beautiful gesture, completed with the overwhelming strength of just now, caused words of peerless beauty to naturally float in one's mind.

"This is bad… it's like, Suzu is going to find her second Onee-sama."

"I'm not thinking anything at all. Yeah, I'm not thinking anything and I'm sticking to that. God dammit."

Perhaps the conversation between Suzu and Ryuutaro reached her ear, Tio turned her gaze at the two and smiled gently. Even that smile made the two of them completely flurried with every bit of it.

"Both of thou are safe. For thou both to arrive here means you have passed through thy trial then?"

"Ye, yes. So, somehow…"

"O, ou, desu. We passed, desu." (TN: Ryuutaro here suddenly used a polite language.)

Tio tilted her head toward Suzu and Ryuutaro who was behaving strangely. Even such gesture wasn't something good for the heart of the two currently. Even though normally she was just an excessive pervert, this gap was just foul! The two of them wanted to make that tsukkomi with a loud voice. Especially Ryuutaro.

Even while feeling confused about the state of the two, Tio looked at the passage Tio and Ryuutaro passed behind them.

"There are only the two of thou that linked up?"

"Ye, yes. We didn't see, anybody else."

Nodding "Is that so" at Suzu's words, Tio made a little disappointed face. And then with her pained expression that caused the body temperature of Suzu and Ryuutaro to increase, even more, she leaked out in a small voice.

“If the master is here, and he heard about my thought when I first met master that my false image exposed—I will be punished right now without delay. Furthermore, it will be an extraordinary punishment without a doubt. How unfortunate.”

“What is unfortunate is you.”

“Unconsciously, Suzu and Ryuutaro made tsukkomis harmoniously. It was truly, truly unfortunate… in various meaning.

However, just for a little, it was relieving to see that Tio was really a pervert just as expected, but it felt like losing somehow to feel that so they absolutely wouldn’t say it out loud.

Chapter 147 – The Foundation of A Hero

“Haha, my apologies. The backlash of being serious for too long made my pathos leak out for just a little much.”

“… A little?” X2

The light of regeneration magic that Tio exercised enveloped Suzu and Ryuutaro, illuminating the passage. The words that Tio said while smiling during that time were tsukkomi-ed by them with scornful eyes.

The nobility of Tio that was usually unseen, her elegance that was mistaken as royalty, her refinement, the recoil from all those that caused Suzu and also Ryuutaro’s hearts to be palpitating thoroughly made the gazes that were directed at Tio colder than usual. Especially Ryuutaro, it felt like his pure heart was toyed with, even though he understood that it was just an outburst of anger, his mental state couldn’t help but lower the temperature of his gaze.

Drifting inside such a strange atmosphere, after the light of healing that had enveloped the two had vanished, their bodies were in perfect health without even a single injury. It was just a few seconds since Tio exercised her regeneration magic.

“Even though it was amazing… it was amazing but… but Suzu cannot honestly praise it now. But, thank you Tio-san.”

“Me too, I wonder just why this kind of pervert is like this but… thanks anyway.”

“Thou art welcome. Also Ryuutaro. Even if thou insulted me, I won’t feel happy you know? I won’t wag my tail to anybody except master. I’m truly sorry.”

A vein appeared on Ryuutaro’s temple. Inside his heart he cursed “It’s like I’m trying to attract her but getting dumped instead, isn’t it”. He didn’t say anything out loud because there would be no end to it.

Once again, unspeakable rage that shuddered welled up from inside him against Tio who was calmly using two exact opposite aspects, the dignified beauty just now and the perversion that conveniently converted any kind of attack into pleasure. At the same time…

“… Just as I thought, Nagumo is amazing, huh?”

“Suzu doesn’t think that Nagumo-kun needs that kind of praise though.”

Thinking about Hajime went along with Tio's everything, Ryuutaro saw the depth of Hajime's magnanimity as a man, no, as a human and raised his praise to him. Surely it was just as Suzu said, if Hajime heard that he would surely have a vein appearing in his forehead saying that it was not the case.

Like that, Suzu and Ryuutaro were fed up by Tio's perversion that she naturally emitted. During that time, the end of the passage became visible ahead. It was the next room.

"Hmm, there art multiple presences on the other side. It seems there are members who have already linked up there."

"Nagumooo, please be there. I won't be able to hold back if you don't take her off our hands soon."

"Please god, make it so the owner is there."

Suzu and Ryuutaro murmured in prayer after hearing Tio's words. And then Suzu also nonchalantly said something cruel. It seemed that since she passed her trial, she had learned to punch straight with her words.

Like that, the ice wall the three approached melted and vanished and what was at the other side of the wall was…

"MuuIIIii, Yue you bhird braiiiinn!!"

"… Shut hup. Closeht phervertt"

"Aah geez. You two, stop it alreadyyy…"

There straddling above the lying down Yue, Kaori was pulling Yue's cheeks *gyuuuuuuu*, and toward Kaori who was doing that, Yue similarly pinched up Kaori's cheeks *muniiiiii*, and then, Shia was mediating those two in a dither.

"What's this…"

"Cat fight?"

"This is their usual quarrel. They really have a good relationship."

Suzu and Ryuutaro were dumbfounded. Tio's expression was smiling peacefully. Looking at the figures of the two that were pulling the other's cheeks with teary eyes while striking each other like pawing cats, surely it couldn't be helped that their expression turned like that. The two girls were merely running out of magic power due to the huge fight just now and so this quarrel was the most that they could do.

"Eh? Tio-san? Also both of you. So all of you safely overcame the trial then. I'm glad. Come now Yue-san, Kaori-san, Tio-san and others have arrived hereee! Stop fighting alreadyyy! Come on, release your hands from the cheeks, don't keep hitting at each other! Ah, over there, don't kick! Please calmly… I said stop it alreadyyy!"

Shia snapped toward Yue and Kaori who wouldn't stop quarreling childishly. Two reinforced fists were striking down on the heads of the two, a *GOKIN!* sound that shouldn't have rung out reverberated. Yue and Kaori crouched down while holding their heads. "My headd-, my headd~" They groaned like so.

“Hmm, it seems that the position of Shia and Yue strangely got reversed since we came to this labyrinth… I wonder if Yue also slightly received the influence of the great labyrinth? Well, it’s interesting to look at anyway.”

Tio tilted her head while murmuring her guess that was half correct. Yue was also exhausted because she recalled various memories of the far past. She even let out a weak-hearted remark against her better judgment. Rather, with how large her past trauma it was strange that it ended with just this much.

And then, the unconscious reliance that was created from the weakness of Yue’s heart… that was naturally directed at her lover Hajime, but even Shia who had remarkable growth since she was acknowledged as lover by Hajime was also not just a handful little sister anymore and turned into a reliable partner that Yue was apt to rely on. In other words, in addition of Shia’s growth, her distance with Yue was also shrinking further.

“Fuu, my apologies, we made you wait. The new passage is over there, so let’s advance forward.”

“… Thou art really reliable right now.”

Shia urged them ahead while carrying Yue and Kaori at both sides under her arms. Tio nodded at that while looking fondly.

The party advance through the passage once more. The people who they hadn’t found were three people, Hajime, Shizuku, and Kouki. They were walking forward while praying so that they could link up at the next room.

Like that now, they suddenly stood still in front of the ice wall that was at the end of the passage they had reached. Shia’s rabbit ears were twitching around while she was making a complicated face. Right after that, her eyes widened in shock.

“Eh… tho, those two too?”

The sudden words and attitude of Shia who had sharp senses caused the other members to look at her wondering what was going on. Yue, Kaori, Tio, the three of them immediately concentrated and reached out their senses at the other side of the ice wall. And the result, they understood what made Shia surprised and they looked at each other.

“Nothing will begin even if we just stand here. We can only confirm the situation directly.”

“… Nn. If he is Hajime’s enemy, I will beat him up.”

“Err, Yue? That’s a little… ”

“Anyway, let’s go.”

While her cheek was twitching at Yue who was narrowing her eyes dangerously, Kaori could only pray that she wished it was just a quarrel like her and Yue.

But, that prayer didn’t reach.

Ahead of the ice wall they passed, at the next room, storm of killing intent and hatred was blowing violently.

Yes, Hajime and Kouki were currently in mortal combat.

Amanogawa Kouki.

He who was born as the only son of an ordinary household had someone who he respected and idolized from the heart even now. That someone was Kouki's grandfather.

The name of that grandfather was Amanogawa Kanji, he was a skilled attorney famous in business world. It was established custom for the family to go play at their grandfather's house when it was a long holiday, but Kanji's wife—because Kouki's grandmother had passed away early, the grandfather that was living alone was very affectionate toward Kouki.

For his age, Kanji's back was straight and his muscular body was overflowing with ambition, nevertheless, he wasn't scary, but a gentle person. Kouki idolized dearly such a grandfather as his, that was to say he was a grandfather's boy.

What Kouki liked the most from Kanji was Kanji's story of his experiences. The experiences that Kanji obtained from his work as an attorney were told to Kouki as though he was reading from a picture book so that the small Kouki could easily understand them. Realistically speaking, the stories were also considerably arranged to not breach the duty of confidentiality, but even so, the eloquent stories of his grandfather were full of human drama that caused Kouki's heart to dance many times.

Helping the weak, crushing the strong, reaching his hand to a troubled person without hesitation, accomplishing the correct thing, always being fair… in the end, Kanji's stories were a thing that included that kind of teaching. A hero's tale that personified ideal and justice. A common story for young children.

Because of that, for Kouki, his grandfather Kanji was exactly a hero. Just like how other children of his age idolized a certain masked rider or the space alien that defeated space monsters even faster than instant ramen could cook, Kouki idolized Kanji like that. It could be said that because his target to idolize was nearby that Kouki's idolizing was even stronger than other children. He wished "someday I will be like grandfather".

But, naturally, the real world couldn't be like Kanji's story where truth and justice defeated the evil and unreasonable, and the righteousness of ideals could be realized without end. In the occupation of attorney, even if they held justice and fairness, their foremost mission wasn't to pursue the truth or impeach the guilty but to protect the interest of their client.

To be called as 'competent' attorney, it wasn't enough with just having excellent skill as an attorney, it was also because Kanji was a human who could realistically think with good and evil at the same time. He thoroughly knew about the dirty part of society and also how it was insufficient to just carry ideal and justice in hand.

But, before he could teach that to Kouki he passed on to the next world. It was before Kouki entered elementary school. The cause was an acute heart attack.

Kanji's death left behind a large influence on Kouki.

The thinking that it was okay for a young child to only think of beautiful things was something really normal, Kanji couldn't be blamed because of that. Someday, when Kouki grew up, he was planning to also talk to Kouki about bitter experience that included reality when things wouldn't go as you expected.

The death of the hero he idolized was a shock for Kouki. He thought of his beloved grandfather, the more he soaked in his memory of Kanji the more he beautified his image of Kanji as a hero, putting a deep root of 'the ideal righteousness' into the deepest part of young Kouki's heart.

That righteousness was following the teaching of his grandfather that sounded pleasant to the ears of children, at the same time it was righteousness that didn't recognize the 'impure' part inside the minority or good and evil at all. To further say it, Kouki came to think that what the majority of people thought as right was the absolute right.

Although it wasn't like that was something peculiar. Children everywhere always watched the hero from television or comics that held the ideal righteousness inside their heart.

And then, those children would pile up days of living, repeating many failures from crashing into the wall of reality. Sometimes, they would experience setback, learn how to give up and compromise. They would naturally study the way to sail the storm of reality skillfully.

They would keep their aspiration as just aspiration, ideal as just ideal, storing all those inside a treasure box that they put at the corner of their heart while looking at reality. That was the natural course of events. Kouki too should be like that. If that happened, then there would be no problem at all.

However, Kouki was too prodigious to ride the natural course of events. His high specs allowed him to overcome the wall of reality while following his ideal. Without any failure or setback, he pushed through every situation with his own strength. His ideal of children completely passed through.

As a result, without realizing it, Kouki came to not doubt his own righteousness. He was cautioned many times about the danger of that by several people close to him, especially by his parents and Shizuku, but Kouki only heard that advice with a smile. He didn't listen seriously or reform himself. In the first place, he had charisma and his principle was solely based on good intention, so not including those several people that cautioned him, everyone else supported Kouki and that was also one factor that caused Kouki to not change.

Of course, there was no way everything went well without anything wrong at all. Several problems cropped up in places that Kouki wasn't aware of. The envy at Shizuku was also one of those.

But, Kouki who didn't doubt his own righteousness maintained it by his convenient interpretation. That was also helped along by the people who adored Kouki blindly pushing his back. So as expected, Kouki didn't notice his convenient interpretations. Even though he received warnings, he also didn't try to notice.

Such 'ideal righteousness' of Kouki had distorted even though it was overflowing with good intention. It began to crumble in this another world. Different from the peaceful Japan, in another world that ran rampant with killing intent and hatred, supernatural and absurdity, his spec and convenient interpretation didn't work. The prime example was the devil woman he faced in the lower floors of Orcus, and Hajime who went under a change of heart.

For the first time, Kouki saw the wall of reality before his eyes. He experienced painful failure that exposed the 'child' inside his heart.

And then…

{She was taken away. Right?}

"No! She is not taken…"

The false image of Kouki with ashen hair clad in black armor was staring with those reddish black eyes while ridiculing Kouki, who was breathing roughly while sweating like a river, immediately objected.

"It's just as Shizuku said, from the beginning Kaori liked Nagumo… that's why I…"

{You don't need to lie to yourself. I am you. I know you better than anyone else. You pretended to accept what Shizuku said, but deep in your heart, you are thinking that she is taken from you. You are still thinking that Kaori should be together with you. You two had been together all this time since elementary school. I don't know about the meeting at middle school or anything, but even though she has been with me longer, even though I believed that from now on we will always be together too, even though Kaori is the heroin of me the hero…}

"Shut up. I'm not thinking anything like that! Don't say whatever you want- you labyrinth monster! You won't lead me astray!"

Kouki glared at the false image with bloodshot eyes and let loose a blade of light with all his strength. Several streaks of slashing light rushed toward the false image.

However, the false image let fly light blades with exactly the same trajectories, neutralizing them all. No, far from that, several of the lights didn't stop and attacked straight towards Kouki. It was the proof that he lost completely in strength.

{You say that but in contrast you are shaken really bad, huh. Even the holy sword that Nagumo especially upgraded, like this it's just throwing a pearl before the swine. Or else exactly because it is created by that hateful Nagumo you envied, that you don't want to use it properly, perhaps?}

"That's irrelevant! I, don't hate Nagumo or any…"

{Come on, it's because you immediately averted your eyes from reality like this… that I'm strengthened again here.}

An extra large 'Soaring Heaven Sword – Quake' was unleashed by the false image. Its might was obviously different compared from before. His own signature move that was gouging the ground while approaching him made Kouki shudder and he immediately dodged to the side. His instinct told him that he couldn't block that.

{Not just Kaori, you also cannot stomach Yue and others adoring Nagumo, right? Girls that are that cute, strong, and charming, aren't they worthier to be together with a hero like me? You cannot accept they adore someone like Nagumo who can easily cut down a human. right?}

"Cut it out! Those girls seriously love Nagumo… that's something those girls decided themselves… that's why-"

{Nagumo's strength is also irritating. That strength originally should be mine, isn't it? Rather, Nagumo's everything is just vexing yeah.}

"Wrong-. Certainly, Nagumo likes to act as he pleases, but he saved us many times… that kind of guy…"

{You said you don't hate him? You mustn't lie. Even when you were saved, you felt jealousy instead of gratitude, didn't you? Even though gallantly rushing to save someone is my role, you envied him like that, didn't you?}

"There is no way that's true! Such a thing…"

{Oi, oi, just how much you are going to strengthen me until you are satisfied?}

That wish of his to be a hero, the envy to Hajime that was nearly a hatred, and then his desire to monopolize Kaori along with his desire for other people's good will… having those shoved to his face, Kouki objected with the large part of himself believing his own words. Like that, because he was unconsciously avoiding recognizing it, the false image was strengthened endlessly.

The false image of Kouki lifted his black holy sword to the sky. Right after that, a dazzling surge of light burst out from there and the light split open near the ceiling, it became several streaks of meteors that began to bomb Kouki.

Kouki avoided those with 'Shrink Ground' while looking for the chance to counterattack, but the color pasted on his face was obviously one of fluster. Cold sweat couldn't stop flowing from the strength of the false image.

The meteors that were attacking from the air were equipped with homing functions to some degree and Hajime's impact conversion so there was nothing more troublesome than this. Even if he waited until they almost hit before evading instantly, if he was late in the timing even for just a little the storm of shockwaves would swallow him. Having said that, only neutralizing the attack like this without being able to counterattack would only turn this into a war of attrition.

'Because Hajime put those functions'… for a moment such thinking was whirling inside his chest. Kouki wiped that thought away in a fluster. That was because such thinking wasn't 'right' toward the person who lent his hand to him. That was why right after that he sealed the memory that he even had such a thought in the bottom of his mind.

"Fly and turn, 'Soaring Heaven Sword – Storm'!!"

Kouki somehow slipped through the explosion and started counterattacking. Kouki's slash was added with wind blade, the slash of wind that was hard to see even in the best of times slipped into the light and magic power and became even harder to perceive. The visible slashes were ten, but actually slashes in thrice that number were launched in a spread to block any escape.

{That's pointless. Assemble, 'Heaven Claw Flowing Rain – Quake'.}

In response, the false image was wearing a cool face. The light bullets that became meteors flew wildly and instantly converged on the black holy sword, converted into a streak of bombardment. There was no need to escape or anything, he just needed to smash Kouki's attack from the front.

That plan came to fruition. And it was extremely easily on top of it. The countless blades Kouki launched were scattered with just a single flash. The bombing of light charged at Kouki without stopping.

“block, ‘Light Armor’!!”

The holy armor that Kouki was wearing shined, countless rings of light extended in front of him and produced a barrier. Immediately after, the light bombing hit and scattered with a severe flash and impact. ‘Heaven Claw Flowing Rain’ originally was a technique that didn’t have that much power, but Hajime’s demonic remodeling and the strengthened power of the false image were combined and sublimed the technique into one with might that wouldn’t be an exaggeration to be called a sure kill technique.

Therefore…

“Guwaa!?”

Kouki’s barrier was smashed and he was grandly blown away. He rolled all over the ground and finally stopped moving when he crashed into the ice wall. Blood was trickling down from his temple.

{You want to overwhelm him, right? That Nagumo. You want to make that guy kneel and beg for forgiveness. After that, you will take back Kaori, Yue and the others will direct their favor to you, save the world, bring everyone back home, showered in admiration…}

“SHUT UPPPPPP!”

While feeling the black emotion that was fished out from the depth of his heart, Kouki drove his flaming hot body forward following his violent fury. Vast amounts of magic power from that body became a bursting out a torrent, it was ‘Limit Break’.

Kouki himself understood that it wasn’t the right time to use it, but he couldn’t listen to the words of the false image more than this. He didn’t want to notice the emotion that shouldn’t be harbored by himself who should be righteous. That was his whole heartedness.

Kouki stepped in with terrific speed that should even be called god speed. He swung down the holy sword that was shining pure white with brute force. That was easily blocked with a scoff by the false image of Kouki whose body was clad in reddish black magic power before he realized. The false image was also using ‘Limit Break’.

The pure white holy sword and the ominous jet-black holy sword clad in reddish black aura clashed, in that instant violent impact rushed out and a crater was created under the false image.

The moment Kouki understood he was blocked, he twisted his wrist and changed into a sweep of the sword. The wood chopping attack transformed like a lie into a neck mowing attack. However, even that attack which was like a sudden flash was easily blocked by the false image.

{Isn’t murder of humans evil?}

“You are not human!”

The teasing words of the false image made Kouki gritted his teeth while accelerating his sword even more. The sword left behind a trail of light while *zurararara-* creating countless after images. The

sword that should be just one piece looked like several swords at the same time with its abnormal speed.

The storm of sharp swordplay that continuously swung in circle motions never stopped, as expected from the person that was supposed to be praised as a hero. That strength could be quickly ranked from above even in this world.

But, the enemy before his eyes perfectly responded with similar swordplay that left behind after images with his composed expression still unbroken. On the contrary, the false image saw an opening and let out a counterattack that created a shallow wound on Kouki who couldn't dodge.

"UOOOOOOOOOOOOOOH!!"

{What's the matter? You are smeared in that much killing intent… huh, hero?}

Kouki yelled while exhausting the martial arts that he possessed, but his heart that was totally disarrayed even if he didn't recognize it made him unable to display his strength except as a paltry shadow of his original strength. Naturally, with that, there was no path to win against the likes of his false image that was gradually turning stronger, his uneasiness was also growing violent when he thought about the time limit of 'Limit Break'.

There, the false image further talked with words that shook Kouki's mind. That wasn't Kouki's negative part that was brought up from the past, but words that incited his anxiety about the future.

{If you are like this, you might have more things taken away again.}

"What are… "

{Let's stop with your pretense of not noticing. After all, something that I noticed is also something that you notice.}

"That's why-! What are you talking about-"

The false image sent Kouki an exasperated gaze as though he was looking at an idiot. And then, he easily said the thing that Kouki feared the most.

{Just who is Shizuku looking at… that's what I mean.}

"—!!"

Kouki felt like the blood all over his body was boiling. He screamed soundlessly, and when his mouth couldn't go further he launched a shockwave from close range that might swallow himself too.

The false image easily withdrew from that using 'Shrink Ground' and he continued with mocking words toward Kouki's desperation.

{So you don't even want to think about it? After Kaori was taken away, on top of it, even Shizuku will… }

"DIEEEEEEE!!"

{Oi, oi, that's not a line of a hero, you know? Besides, no matter how much you shout, it's the truth that Shizuku's heart is leaning toward Nagumo. It might even be understandable, yeah? She was saved by him several times already, and Shizuku is unexpectedly girly.}

"ZEYAAAAH!!"

Kouki shrieked. The swung holy sword increased in brightness, but the black holy sword was increasing even more than that in the thickness of its ominous magic power. Inside Kouki's heart, he was trying to deny Shizuku's feeling and throw away the reality with all his might, which in turn raised the strength of the false image endlessly.

Therefore, the unsightly attack that although was done with all his strength but no different than throwing a tantrum, was easily repelled from the front.

"Gaah!?"

Kouki screamed and he was blown away towards the wall once more. Although the magic power convergence ability of his holy armor lengthened the lasting time of 'Limit Break',if he recklessly exhausted himself then even that benefit would be pointless. The time Kouki had left was only a little.

{I see. You even deny Shizuku's matter.}

The false image was walking to Kouki with clacking footsteps, he was shaking his head while sending a cold gaze at Kouki.

Kouki somehow stood up using his holy sword as a stick while his breathing was blocked from the impact, he returned a bloodshot gaze to the false image.

"Wr, wrong. Toward Nagumo, Shizuku… such a thing… no way it could possibly…"

{Venting her anger, sulking, showing a smile from her heart… you noticed all those, right?}

"Something like that… she did that to every…"

{Even though when she saw Yue and Shia close with Nagumo, she was making a sullen face?}

"… That's just… because they didn't know the place… that was displeasing for…"

{And the awkward face she made when looking at Kaori approaching that guy?}

"… Shizuku… she is also not recognizing… Nagumo from her heart."

{Ku-ku-ku, that's just extreme even if I say so myself huh. You don't want to believe it that much?}

In front of Kouki who was on his knee while supporting his body with the holy sword, the false image was chuckling while pointing his holy sword. The false image sneered even further at Kouki who was glaring murderously.

And then for a moment, "Oho?" the false image faced at ice wall where there was nothing with a surprised expression. He sensed the familiar presence approaching from the other side of the ice wall with 'Presence Detection'. Although it seemed Kouki didn't even have the composure to notice that.

{This is… what good timing.}

“Don’t act composed!”

Kouki leaped up and slashed up his holy sword at what he saw as an opening. Without even looking at that the false image blocked the sword into sword locking contest while grinning widely, and then he passed down words that sounded like a death sentence.

{Now, the reality is coming here, you know?}

“What are you saying-“

Right after that a part of ice wall of the room where the two of them were at melted, a new passage appeared. Kouki twitched in surprise and while being cautious of the grinning false image in front of his eyes, he slightly moved his gaze at the direction of the passage.

And then, his eyes widened looking at the scene ahead of his gaze.

“Still in the middle of trial huh…”

There was Hajime carrying Shizuku on his back there. Kouki’s gaze was drawn into Shizuku. More accurately, at the sleeping face of Shizuku who looked happy while sweetly entrusting her cheek on Hajime’s shoulder in relief while breathing peacefully.

Something snapped inside Kouki.

Chapter 148 – Child’s Retribution

Pure white radiance became a large waterfall that poured down from overhead.

That was the scene that Hajime witnessed upon passing the ice wall while carrying the pleasantly sleeping Shizuku on his back.

Hajime understood the true meaning of what happened. Because if this was just a misunderstanding made because he was confused for a monster or something using a ‘Yaegashi Barrier’, then the attack would surely be stopped desperately.

But no matter how he looked at it, there was no sanity in the eyes of the opponent, so he reluctantly performed an evasion from the spot using ‘Ground Shrink’.

Immediately after, the spot where Hajime was just at was struc by a brutal slash, a deep crack being created on the ice ground and wall followed by a thunderous roar.

Although the crack was repaired instantly, looking at the destruction mark, it was easy to see that the attack was not a joke – but was created with the intent to kill. And above all, the killing intent just before and the amount of magic power put into the attack showed the true seriousness of it.

Hajime sent a glance at the false image that was grinning widely in a slightly distanced spot, then he fixed the position of Shizuku on his back while narrowing his eyes at the culprit of the act of violence.

Shizuku didn’t succumb even to the thunderous roar of the attack and only twitched for a moment before continuing her sleep. Was she really that tired? Or perhaps she was so in peace that she wouldn’t react to a danger of this level? There was also the possibility that she was just merely being shameless, though…

“… So? What are you doing, Amanogawa?”

Yes, exactly as Hajime said, the culprit of the attack was Kouki. It wasn’t the false image, but the real one without any doubt.

That Kouki tightly gripped his holy sword that was still half-buried into the half-crushed ground while grumbling something. His bangs hung low, hiding his eyes so his expression couldn’t be seen clearly, but he was obviously not in a normal state.

“… ga…da. … de, u… ra” (TN: I don’t know if Kouki here is totally broken already or it’s me that cannot catch what the author means.)

“Haa? I cannot hear that. Anyway, your opponent is not us, it’s over…”

“… Us?”

Hajime frowned because he couldn’t really catch Kouki’s murmur while directing his gaze at the false image. He did that while implicitly telling Kouki to attack the enemy without mistake next time.

However, Kouki showed an excessive reaction to a part of Hajime’s words. Piercing eyes peeked out from between his bangs, then his stabbed holy sword was forcefully pulled out.

“The way you say that is like you and Shizuku are one set, isn’t it? Eh? What, the way you are talking is like she belongs to you? Are you screwing around?”

“… Just what are you saying? Don’t say such a stupid thing, finish this quickly.”

Kouki directed the attack at Hajime’s bloodshot look while dragging the holy sword. The unclear meaning of Kouki’s words made Hajime feel an unpleasant premonition while he urged Kouki to clear the trial.

However, as expected, Hajime’s words couldn’t get through to the current Kouki.

“… Ah, I’ll end it now. Even without you telling me every little thing, I’ll end everything!”

The moment he yelled that Kouki faced Hajime with a gaze that emitted madness from his opened pupils while charging forward. His figure hazed using ‘Implosion Ground’ while he pressed hard in one go and then unleashed a slash of light filled with enormous magic power.

“Tch, so you fell. You stupid bastard.”

“Shut up! Everything will return to before if you die-! DIE RIGHT NOWWWW!”

Hajime guessed the cause of Kouki’s eccentricity. Surely this was the result of his false image cornering him so much. Then, Hajime looked over his shoulder at Shizuku who was entrusting her body on his back, “So I’m the finishing blow…” he murmured in a small voice while frowning about his bad timing.

Kouki completely ignored that murmur of Hajime and he only recklessly held his holy sword at full power with a seething killing intent and hatred. He was obviously trying to kill Hajime. Regardless of Shizuku who was on Hajime’s back, Kouki attacked without holding back and Hajime concluded that he wasn’t sane.

“Nn, nmuu, what? Let me sleep a little mo…”

“You idiot! How can you sleep talk in this situation! If you don’t wake up right now, then I’ll make you into a human cannonball, just so you know!”

Looking at the half-asleep face of Shizuku who was peevish like a spoiled child, Hajime made a violently irritated look and yelled angrily. If she didn’t wake up in one second, then he was seriously planning on punching Kouki.

Hajime’s angry yell, the thunderous roar, and a flash of the cannon of light that was released right after that finally made Shizuku open and widen her eyes in shock. Hajime deployed the barrier using cross bits so the attack didn’t reach them, but the scenery in front of her eyes finally made her notice that they were in the middle of battle, and she dejectedly got down from Hajime’s back.

“You slept too much, like a log just now. What a shameless fellow.”

“I’m not shameless or anything. It’s just that Nagumo-kun’s back felt so…”

“Well, it doesn’t matter about you, Yaegashi. Putting that aside, do something about it.”

“Doesn’t matter what you say… or rather this situation, what happened… eh?”

Shizuku got teary eyed from quite the shock that she received by Hajime’s exasperated expression and words. However, after the flash settled down she saw the figure of the opponent that seemed to be the one who unleashed that attack. This caused her to leak out a dumbfounded voice while her body turned rigid.

That surely couldn’t be helped, because the opponent who unleashed the attack with an obviously high chance of casualties was a childhood friend she was familiar with.

“It seems that he fell, see? It feels like he’s thinking that I am exactly the root of all evil.”

“That’s…”

Ahead of her gaze was the false image of Kouki. He was sending them an amused look.

Shizuku who guessed the general situation filled her gaze with strength and then raised her voice at Kouki who was looking at them with clouded eyes.

“Kouki! Don’t do this! You mustn’t lose to your other self! Come back to your senses, overcome yourself!”

The gaze of Shizuku who was looking at Kouki was colored only with worry. Even though there were various troubles with him, he was still a good childhood friend of hers who was overflowing with good intention. He was an acquaintance of hers, including his family, from when they were children to now. He was like her important family. And now his expression was warped with killing intent and hatred that she had never seen before.

She really couldn’t look at him like this. Both her hands clasped as though she was praying, trying desperately to rouse up Kouki’s heart.

However, toward such a Shizuku, Kouki smiled and said something outrageous.

“… It’s fine. I swear that I will save Shizuku without fail.”

“Kouki? What are you saying…?”

“You are brainwashed by Nagumo, right? It’s okay. You will be freed if Nagumo is defeated…. Nagumo, even though you are my former classmate, don’t think that you can get off scot free after hurting my important childhood friend. I’ll defeat you, and release all your brainwashing of Kaori and the other girls too! And then, I’ll save the world together with them!”

Shizuku was dumbstruck at Kouki’s outrageous declaration.

The current Kouki, so to speak, could be considered like the Kouki had Shizuku not spoken with him the night when Kaori departed with Hajime’s group previously. At that night, the weight filled inside Shizuku’s words stopped Kouki from running wild.

He couldn’t immediately change the way he thought since there was also a lot of aspects in Hajime he was bothered with. That was why he bumped against Hajime over and over again, but even so, because he had the words of Shizuku, he wouldn’t say anything about Kaori too, as long as there was no complete separation between her and Hajime.

However, to put it in other words, it could also be said that Kouki could do that only because Shizuku was at his side.

Kouki’s sense of value and thought were perhaps included with ‘childishness’. He kept carrying the ‘ideal righteousness’ that was planted in his infancy without any wall of reality standing in his way, and he kept it like that until his current age, so perhaps this was only the logical development.

For such a childish Kouki, if the last female childhood friend where he directed his desire to monopolize was taken, then it would also seem natural that his ‘temper’ would explode.

Although, the temper of Kouki who was holding the power of a hero wasn’t a laughing matter at all…

Furthermore, Kouki who held a ‘childishness’ that wasn’t eager to recognize one’s own fault was thoroughly cornered by the reality that was shoved on his face by his false image. The emotion that wasn’t fitting for a hero like him was overflowing from inside his heart, carving into him like a slashing blade.

He desperately denied it. He averted his eyes. And when he just barely held his ground, his last fortress that was Shizuku was entrusting her body with a happy expression that obviously wouldn’t be shown to a man that was nothing to her. Even the thickheaded Kouki could guess just what the meaning of that was. And then exactly because he could guess that. his fortress crumbled. Kouki’s bad habit coupled with his cornered heart manifested in the worst way.

That was to say, Nagumo Hajime was the root of all evil who brainwashed his childhood friends and multiple other girls, who then became a hindrance for him who was trying to save the world. That was the impression his heart was set on. A really convenient interpretation without holding back.

“Kouki! Get a hold of yourself! I don’t know what was told to you, but don’t go astray!”

“Shizuku…”

“Listen, Kouki. Facing your own disgusting part is really painful. I understand that well because I also almost died from that. But if you don’t accept and overcome it, then you won’t be able to move forward. If you want to become strong and save a lot of people, then you must not cling to convenient thinking here. Your enemy is yourself. It’s the other smirking Kouki there! Open your eyes!”

Shizuku’s desperate persuasion echoed inside the space. It seemed that the false image intended to observe the current situation silently in amusement.

And then Kouki who was being told by Shizuku using words from her heart smiled widely at Shizuku. That was a smile that was done a lot when they were in Japan, a smile that charmed a lot of girls. However, right now it felt distorted somewhere in it.

“Thank you, Shizuku. Shizuku, you always become serious like that for my sake, don’t you?”

“Kouki…”

Shizuku’s expression was dyed in joy thinking that he had opened his eyes.

But…

“I’m really happy. Even though you are brainwashed, even so, you still think of me.”

“… Kouki?”

“It’s fine. I’ll defeat that man and that monster with the same face like me, and I’ll save you from Nagumo too. You don’t need to snuggle close to a man that you don’t even like anymore. I swear I’ll let Shizuku return back to the place where you should be at.”

“…”

Shizuku’s expression fell hearing out Kouki’s words. Shizuku silently asked back…

“… The place I should be at? Can you tell me where this place is that you mean?”

“I see. … So now you cannot even understand that. How pitiful. What Nagumo is doing is really unforgivable.”

“Kouki. Answer me.”

“Aah, that is of course, at my side. Just like all this time until now, and from here on out too.”

Shizuku breathed out a long sigh.

“… Kouki. I wonder if you remember about that night? That day Kaori departed when we talked on the bridge.”

“Yeah, of course, I remember. That thing about doubting my righteousness, right? It’s fine. I thought that Nagumo was dangerous guy since the beginning, but because of Shizuku’s words, I was looking thoroughly at Nagumo until now. But, as expected, he is nothing more than the worst betrayer.”

“Kouki, stop…”

“There is no use arguing. You don’t understand because you are brainwashed Shizuku, but this is something ‘righteous’.”

Kouki cut down the words of Shizuku that was going to keep arguing vehemently without hesitation. He was putting everything under the convenient interpretation of ‘being brainwashed’, in order to obtain the most desirable future for himself.

At the same time, Kouki directed those eyes which were cloudy like slime and dropped his stance. The radiance of ‘Limit Break’ that he intentionally weakened while he was talking with Shizuku recovered its brilliant radiance as though regaining a second breath.

“Kouki. Stop it!”

Shizuku raised her voice to stop him with impatience coloring her tone but… naturally Kouki didn’t stop.

He charged with a fierce momentum while leaving a track of light behind. His eyes already didn’t reflect Shizuku at all, he was only seeing the figure of his hateful enemy Hajime.

Having a fierce killing intent directed at him, Hajime who was until now looking aside as though what happened wasn’t a concern of his now returned his gaze at Kouki. His eyes were quickly narrowing. The face of Shizuku’s face went pale because she believed that it wouldn’t end well for the opponent when they directed a serious killing intent at Hajime. At this rate, her childhood friend would be killed!

“-, if I don’t stop him-“

In front of the charging momentum of Kouki who was in the ‘Limit Break’ state, the likes of Shizuku was just like a leaf. But even so, there was no way she could just leave this alone, and Shizuku immediately cut in between Kouki and Hajime to try to stop him.

However…

“Yaegashi, to your right.”

“Eh? -!?”

Almost at the same time as Hajime’s warning, she suddenly heard the false image of Kouki clad in reddish-black magic power attacking Shizuku. It was literally like the phrase of thrusting a spear from the side, and the false image commenced a tackle right from the side with terrific momentum. (TN: The phrase had the meaning of interruption in Japan.)

Shizuku immediately held up her black katana and braced herself for impact. At the same time the fast-approaching Kouki that could be mistaken as a reddish-black cannon was noticeably grinning disgustingly.

But just before the fake Kouki touched Shizuku, a shadow suddenly erupted between the two…

That was, a cross clad in wrong magic power similar to the false Kouki. It was a crossbit that contained a really vivid red radiance. It activated ‘Vajra’ and became an improvised shield.

Immediately after, Shizuku and the false image with the crossbit shield between them vanished from between Hajime and Kouki. It was as though the false image had kidnapped Shizuku.

The dregs of the reddish black magic power drifted like a lingering cloud between the two people glaring.

{I'll be Shizuku's opponent. You, you can fight your hateful enemy to your heart's content.}

"Guh, you-. Let go of me! This is not the time for something like…"

{Now now, this is not related to me and Shizuku, is it? Let's enjoy a sideshow while those two are dancing. Rather than self-destruction, getting possessed with his own desire is more fitting for that guy's trial.}

"Doing as you please-"

It appeared that the false image made the trial for Kouki similar to Ryuutaro's, where it incorporated the factor where he needed to win against his own desire. Whether Kouki could accept reality and return to his sense while fighting Hajime or not… that was the trial. It was a real nuisance for Hajime to be treated like an examiner as the labyrinth pleased.

"Is it fine? Your important childhood friend is being attacked there."

"… That thing is also me. He won't kill her. Some wound will surely be a lesson for her to get so easily brainwashed by a man like you."

"… Just now, didn't you say that thing was a monster?"

"It is a mimicking monster that copies my emotion, right? Then, even though it's a monster then it won't kill Shizuku."

"That's just absurd."

That was too much of a convenient interpretation. While he concluded that it was a monster unrelated to himself, he said that it wouldn't put Shizuku into danger because it was something that copied himself. It was really absurd.

Most likely inside his heart, Kouki understood that the false image was made up from his negative emotion already. That was why he subconsciously understood that Shizuku was safe because the negative emotions wouldn't aim at her.

But, if he recognized that then it would mean that he recognized what the false image said as the truth. That was why, in order to throw away everything else other than Shizuku as bullshit, he concluded that it wasn't his false image but a monster. It was a crooked logic that was too forceful, but it seemed that it had become a truth inside Kouki.

Kouki gave a glance at the false image as it unfolded a fierce swordplay with Shizuku while his killing intent was bloating up.

"Prepare yourself. I won't let you do as you please any more than this. Shizuku and Kaori, then Yue and the others too, I'll release everyone from you!"

At the same time as that proclamation, Kouki released the energy he gathered and explosively charged forward. He let out a wood chopping strike from the front without any hesitation.

GOU! Along with a terrific sound of cut wind, the holy sword that looked as though it was made from light itself attacked Hajime violently. However, in front of such a lethal attack, Hajime didn't take even a step back and he only raised his arm.

That hand was holding Donner, *GOKIN-!* the sound of metals clashing and sparks scattered, Kouki's full strength attack was easily blocked. Even more, it was blocked by the gun point of Donner.

"Wha-!?"

Kouki was shocked and leaked out a voice reflexively, Hajime directed a cold gaze at Kouki and opened his mouth.

"There is nothing more meaningless than insulting a true idiot as an idiot… But, I'll just say this much… Asshole, who permitted a bastard like you to name my woman so casually? Huh?" (EN: Kouki used their first names, which is being a little too familiar in Japan)

"-!?"

Immediately after, a torrent of killing intent was overflowing. The pressure was like the pressing of a great waterfall. It was too vast to be called human, a presence of overwhelming 'strength' that was too terrifying. Kouki's body that was struck with the serious monster's coercion from close range was unintentionally stiffening.

DOPAN!

The trigger of Donner was pulled and an electromagnetically accelerated bullet flicked off the holy sword, plugging the muzzle as though it was insulted that it was in the way.

Unable to endure the fierce impact, the holy sword slipped from his hand and danced in the air in circles.

And then, toward Kouki that was making a banzai posture with only one hand, a black shadow from lower region—Hajime's sure-kill yakuza kick lunged.

"Gahah!?"

The yakuza kick that struck Kouki's stomach with a dreadful sound of impact made Kouki's body double into a sideways 'V' shape while floating him in the air like that.

Without a moment's delay, Hajime rotated on the spot and added a back-spinning kick filled with a lot of centrifugal force.

A sound of impact resonated once more. Kouki's body was blown far away as though a large truck was running over him. Kouki that flew horizontally like a cannon had his back struck by an ice wall like that. One could only wonder just how great of an impact that was. The ice wall on his back was largely pulverized into a radial shape.

Kouki fell on the ground after that, he was on all four while coughing. Blood splattered out from his vomiting mouth.

With just a kick without a weapon or ‘Limit Break’, the internal organs of Kouki who was wearing an armor artifact of national treasure class was damaged. That fact made Kouki grit his teeth while groaning painfully.

But, there was no way Hajime would give him time to be frustrated or anything.

DOPAN-! DOPAN-! DOPAN-!

Consecutive sounds of gun discharge roared, and red flashes assaulted the crouching Kouki. Perhaps he noticed Hajime’s killing intent. Kouki leaped aside almost at the same time Hajime pulled the trigger, but it was as though even his dodging direction was read, that the moment Kouki jumped, the third bullet shot through his shoulder.

Furthermore, one of the bullets that Kouki evaded earlier seemed to be a normal bullet that was only clad in red magic power without being accelerated electromagnetically, when it impacted the broken ice wall behind Kouki it ricocheted, and red light attacked

Kouki was shot behind through the knee which passed through his armor’s gap.

“Gua… co, come, holy sword-“

While rolling all over the ground with blood flowing from his shoulder and leg, the collapsed Kouki reached out his hand at the falling holy sword at a slightly distant spot. The holy sword responded to Kouki’s calling voice and flew at him.

However, it didn’t settle into Kouki’s hand. Just before it reached, Hajime stepped on the sword. The holy sword struggled to return to its master, but such resistance was meaningless as the stepping foot didn’t even twitch.

“How unsightly. If you can skillfully use this new ability then surely you will be able to fight better.”

Hajime murmured with a cold tone. He was just speaking to himself without intention for Kouki to hear it, but it seemed Kouki heard it completely. He glared at Hajime with an expression warped in hatred as though he was trying to kill him with his gaze.

Donner was pointed at the temple of Kouki. Hajime’s killing intent wasn’t settled yet. He was maintaining the gruesome thickness of his intent that might stop the heart of a normal person. No matter who saw it, it appeared that Hajime intended to deal the finishing blow.

But, a desperate voice resonated at that timing.

“Nagumo-kun! Please, stop! I’ll persuade Kouki, so-“

It was Shizuku. While locked in a sword fight with the false Kouki, she begged for him to spare Kouki’s life with a look colored by fretfulness. But it became a fatal opening, and the development that Shizuku wished wasn’t something that the false image wished for.

Therefore…

{How about Shizuku leave the stage for a little bit?}

“Agh?!”

The shockwave from the false image launched and assaulted Shizuku. Shizuku was struck like that on her whole body, and she was blown away altogether with her consciousness until she hit the wall and collapsed powerlessly while sliding onto the ground.

Because a crossbit interfered between the two just before the attack hit and became a shield, it seemed that Shizuku was rescued from a direct hit, but for Shizuku who had a low defensive power even in the best of times, furthermore the might of a hero's pure output, added by Kouki's thorough rejection of his own negative emotion that strengthened the false image into something far stronger than the real one, just a glancing blow turned into a sufficient enough telling blow. Different from a pure slashing attack, it was a shockwave that induced cerebral concussion, so without taking a recovery measure she wouldn't open her eyes for a while.

The false image of Kouki floated a satisfied smile from his success of skillfully making Shizuku faint, he then turned on his heel and faced Hajime. And then, with a really natural motion, he thrust out his black holy sword and launched a strong bombing of light.

The approaching flash that was drawing in a spiral was on a course that would swallow Kouki with certainty too. Was the false image trying to bury the both of them altogether?… Anyway, Hajime withdrew from that spot. He left Kouki behind.

"UWAAAAH!"

Kouki reflexively screamed and took a defensive stance, but just before the light bombing hit, it curved and began to chase after Hajime.

Hajime discovered the cover of the bombing with his magic eye stone and easily succeeded in pinpoint sniping that dispersed the attack. However, the false image successfully managed to distance Hajime from Kouki just as planned.

The false image walked toward Kouki's side and he whispered something into the ear of the laid-down Kouki. While his mouth split apart into a grin that looked like a crescent moon, his figure that was likely whispering sweet words looked like a demon. There was no way that Kouki could admit that figure was his other self anymore like that.

Before long, Kouki's bloodshot gaze was looking alternately at Hajime and the false image, and he then nodded reluctantly.

Right after that, the figure of the false image thinned down like mist and in exchange reddish-black particles of light began to whirl.

{Now you. It's hero time. Let's rescue the heroines from the scoundrel!}

"Shut up-. I'm not doing your instruction. I'm only using you for now! After defeating Nagumo, it will be your turn, don't forget that-"

At the same time as those words, reddish black particles were entering into Kouki's body and Kouki's body began to pulse. *dokun dokun* A pulsating sound began to echo inside the room and pure white light that Kouki was clad in began to be mixed with a reddish-black color that looked like a blood vessel.

Kouki slowly stood up. Looking carefully, the wounds in his shoulder and leg were also healing. It appeared that the derivative ability Kouki had, ‘Healing Strength Improvement’ was explosively increased.

DOPAN-! DOPAN-!

There, a shooting without questions asked. Something like a kindness for reading the mood by a villain facing a hero, waiting for the transformation scene, was something that Hajime didn’t have. And while he was at it, he also threw several grenades.

Red flashes gouged Kouki’s shoulder and leg, making him unsteady on his feet.

Furthermore, the rolling grenades exploded in flame and he was swallowed in it.

“That’s pointless.”

But what came out from the flame wasn’t what turned Kouki into tatters, but those words.

That voice sounded like it was including joy in it somewhere as if it was trembling in happiness. It seemed that not much damage was inflicted, the magic power that had changed colors from pure white into reddish-black burst up and blew away the flame.

There, the figure of Kouki who became odd-eyed with one of his eyes dyed reddish-black appeared. Even the scar from the shot just now had been mostly healed. The change in his appearance wasn’t just his eye, his originally brown hair was mixed with white mesh, his holy armor was attached with several blood vessel thingies. Furthermore, at his hands, black and white, two holy swords were grasped.

“You combined?”

“It’s not my intention, but yeah. If it’s for defeating you, then I’ll resign myself to accept it. Although later, I’ll defeat this guy too.”

“What are you acting like a good kid for? You are just losing to the temptation.”

“You can insult me however you like. No matter what you say, you cannot win against me anymore. If there is this welling up strength then I can take back everything!”

“Why you are unable to notice that you got hit by loss because of that, I wonder.”

“No more talk. Prepare yourself Nagumo-! ‘Supreme Break’!”

Magic power burst up from Kouki in an even further scale of several times more. The last derivative of ‘Limit Break’ that raised up all his status by five times, ‘Supreme Break’—the strength of Kouki who had taken in his false image had already reached the total of ten thousand. It was literally a rate of increase in monster level.

Kouki made a stance with his twin holy swords. In an instant his figure hazed.

“Haah!”

A yell of spirit could be heard behind Hajime. Kouki had circled at Hajime's back instantly. Two holy swords trailed behind white and reddish black magic power behind while carving a cross at Hajime's back.

Hajime didn't even look back.

(Got him!)

The moment Kouki was convinced of that, a familiar bursting sound resonated. At the same time, the two holy swords were snapped up together with a fierce impact, a red

flash pierced his torso that became defenseless. The defensive power of the armor that had been drastically increased and the 'Physical Resistance' skill as well as its derivative 'Impact Mitigation' made the attack not fatal, but an impact like a normal person receiving the serious body blow of a heavyweight boxer attacked Kouki and blew him away grandly backward.

'How? He should not be able to react.', even while his breath was blocked up, Kouki rearranged his stance in the air and landed. Ahead of his gaze, there was the appearance of Donner's muzzle facing behind with only Hajime's wrist turning back.

Looking at that, Kouki realized that it wasn't because Hajime couldn't react, it was that he didn't even need to turn back. Kouki's expression distorted in humiliation. He put strength on his feet, then he swung down his twin holy swords while screaming, ignoring the pain in his stomach.

"'Heaven Soaring Sword – Storm'!"

Like that, what he launched was hundreds of slashes scattered in a wide range. Just the visible blades of light had been already in a hundred, and nearly three hundred blades of wind were following, lurking at the shadow. The attack was already at a level of obliteration magic.

But such a storm of hundreds of slashes was evaded by Hajime with a swaying motion like a leaf fluttering in the wind, what couldn't be evaded was swept aside or averted.

Furthermore, while avoiding Hajime suddenly aimed Donner at Kouki with a natural motion and launched a counterattack that weaved through the gap of the storm.

The bullet that went through the gap like a joke stabbed under Kouki's feet and scattered grand shockwave, overturning Kouki from under his feet.

And then Hajime himself also slipped through the storm of blades and approached Kouki with speed equal, no, it was faster than Kouki, and he kicked Kouki as though he was a soccer ball.

"Guah!?"

Kouki who raised a groan while thrown to the air was aimed at with Donner & Schlag.

Kouki immediately kicked the air using 'Sky Force' to try to escape from the line of fire, but the two revolvers' muzzles didn't shift from Kouki even for a bit and aimed at his future spot. Kouki's expression unintentionally cramped.

The scene became slow as though Kouki and Hajime's senses were stretched out. Inside the world of dull color, just before Hajime pulled the trigger, he caught the figure of Shizuku at the corner of his sight. Her figure that desperately tried to persuade Kouki and her entreaty to spare his life flashed at the back of Hajime's mind. At the same time, he also recalled the figure of Kaori who was also this guy's childhood friend.

Hajime clicked his tongue 'tch' a bit, averted his gun muzzles a bit, and he pulled the triggers consecutively with blurring speed.

DOPAAAAN!

The sound of a single gunshot that was slightly stretched was the proof of the simultaneous shots. Like a reversely-restored meteors, red flashes cut through the air, showering Kouki in the air with blows. Like a marionette that was unsightly manipulated by children, *gakun gakun* Kouki's body shook while drawing a parabolic arc.

Kouki was scattering blood spray while he fell on the slightly distanced spot with a raw sound *dosha!* that resonated. Looking from the side perhaps it looked like a corpse that had been gouged by many bullets. But, that guess was denied immediately by the movement that came from Kouki. He wasted no time to stand up using the twin holy swords as support.

Blood was spurting out from his shoulders, both arms, and both legs, but those were healed in a moment. His bloodshot eyes were colored with madness, turning his look even more gruesomely. There was not even a trace of the hero who was stuffed with the dream and hope of the people anymore.

"You are holding back? Are you making fun of me?"

All of the places he was shot at weren't vital spots. It was an attack that was transparently tried to make the opponent powerless. Therefore, Kouki felt like he wasn't even seen as an opponent even though here he was fighting to kill. Inside his chest, a muddy black part was further welling up.

Hajime tapped Donner on his shoulder *ton ton* while answering easily as though it was nothing.

"Well, you who fall that far is just troublesome and it's better to kill you but… if I do that Yaegashi and Kaori will cry. I'll beat you up appropriately and I'll leave the rest to your childhood friends."

"-, don't screw with me-! I'll make you lose that composure right now!"

Once more Kouki brandished his twin holy swords while approaching closer. Hatred and jealousy were attached on his face.

It seemed that Hajime was thinking about the two girls more than himself, it made severe displeasure fill his chest.

Fierce swordplay assaulted Hajime, but everything was handled by him with a cold expression without any hurry, seeing that the black emotion was more and more seething in Kouki and he shouted, unable to bear it.

"You-, someone like you-, don't speak as though you understand! The one who really understand Shizuku and Kaori is me-. The one who treasured the two of them more than anyone is me-. I am the

one that should be together with the two of them-. It's not the likes of you! It's absolutely not a guy like you!"

"… You are like a brat throwing tantrum."

Slipping through the twin holy swords Kouki brandished, Hajime's Donner & Schlag pierced his body from range zero. However, the current Kouki was unstoppable by something like that. Even though holes were opened in his body, it was healed with power that literally surpassed any limit. Kouki ignored the damage and recklessly charged.

That figure was exactly like Hajime said, a figure of a kid that was throwing a tantrum because the situation wasn't going as he wished it.

As though hailing Kouki's negative emotion, the spec of his flesh that had passed its limit a long time ago was forcefully raising even more. Most likely the possessing false image was strengthened and Kouki himself was also strengthened following that.

Looking at the spec, Kouki was already at the level that neared Hajime without 'Limit Break' activated. The storm of swordplay that was unleashed possessed speed and might that resembled the apostle of god 'Nointo', even so, his power was still increasing as though to say that it still wasn't enough.

"OOOOOOOOO-"

"…"

The shrieking of fighting spirit surged from Kouki's mouth. On the other hand, Hajime was… silent. Even with Kouki's spec raising to a level that wasn't inferior to Nointo even though it wasn't superior too, but Hajime didn't let loose the roar of fighting spirit like what he exchanged with Nointo once. And then as expected, he also didn't take a plunge into 'Limit Break'.

It didn't reach Kouki's attack. No matter how fast it became, no matter how strong it got, it didn't even graze Hajime.

The reason was simple. The user's mental area was inexperienced, on top of that it was dull. The attack was frenzied and lacked calmness, the attack was merely wanting to crush the opponent and soaked in joy. Something like that, against anyone, in any kind of place, would surely not reach.

And, at that time, a part of the ice wall behind Kouki melted and an entrance of a passage opened. Hajime sent his gaze there while warding off Kouki's war cry and vilification, there Yue and others, all the members came out.

Seeing Hajime and Kouki's fight, their eyes opened wide and they stood still with a dumbfounded look. However, Kouki didn't even notice them at all, he was merely scattering his hatred and killing intent earnestly in order to kill Hajime.

"If only, if only you weren't here, everything will go well! Kaori and also Shizuku would belong to me forever! I would have saved this world as a hero! You, you are the one that messed up everything!"

"…"

“Even though you are a killer-. Even though you easily abandoned others-. There is no way someone who is the worst can be liked by people!”

“… And so, I brainwashed them?”

“That’s right! There is no other explanation except that! Kaori and Shizuku, and Yue and Shia and Tio too, everyone was brainwashed and played around by you. Sooner or later you are going to brainwash Ryuutaro and Suzu too, aren’t you!? I won’t let you. I am a hero. I’ll save everyone from your hand, I’ll take back everything, everything! You are not needed anymore-!”

That scream was also audible to Yue and others too. The eyes of Yue and Shia narrowed dangerously, and Tio frowned in displeasure. In contrast, Kaori covered his mouth with both hands from the shock she received. She didn’t even have any word toward the absurd grievance of his childhood friend that was too egoist. Ryuutaro and Suzu were also the same, they were staring in a daze at Kouki while being completely stiff.

Hajime made a long sigh inside his heart thinking that this was really one troublesome guy while transmitting ‘Telepathy’ to Yue and others.

{Looks like you all are safe too.}

{… Nn. All good. Rather than that, what’s with that idiot?}

{That’s right. He is saying a really reprehensible thing.}

Yue and Shia returned back to a tone that felt angry. Their beloved person was cursed unfavorably and in the end was declared as unneeded. In addition, they inadvertently also couldn’t stomach Kouki calling them without an honorific.

Hajime leaked out a small smile at the two.

{To explain it simply, he lost to his false image and now he is in the middle of venting his anger with his convenient interpretation in full throttle. He took in his false image and his strength was raised. Looks like he can clear the trial if he regains himself, but… that looks impossible. Even Yaegashi, she tried to persuade him but in the end, she ended up like that.}

Hajime threw a kick at Kouki’s knee to make him flinch while sending his gaze at Shizuku’s direction. Yue and others whose attention were lured by Hajime also sent their gazes there and discovered the fainted Shizuku.

{Shizuku-chan!}

{She wasn’t hit directly. She shouldn’t be seriously wounded, but for the moment, look at her Kaori.}

{Oh, of course! Leave it to me!}

Kaori who was petrified recovered her senses when she saw Shizuku’s figure and she rushed at her in panic.

That motion finally made Kouki notice the existence of Yue and the others too. He took distance from Hajime while turning his gaze at them with wide eyes, next he smiled widely at them.

“Everyone, you all came. Wait a little for me. I swear that I’ll beat this guy and release everyone right now.”

Kouki’s words made Yue, Shia, and Tio go past displeasure and now they directed a pitying gaze at him. In exchange, Ryuutaro and Suzu came back to their senses and they yelled desperately.

“Just what are you saying, Kouki? What the hell! Come back to your senses!”

“Kouki-kun, pull yourself together! The one that you must defeat isn’t Nagumo-kun, it’s yourself!”

Hearing those heartfelt yells of the two, instead of being happy, Kouki’s expression turned into rage. As expected, the target of that rage was Hajime.

“… Nagumo. Don’t tell me, you have even brainwashed Ryuutaro and Shizuku? Just how rotten are you? How much you are going to steal from me until you are satisfied?!

Ah, I see. I understand right now. Even Eri… that was your work, huh? I thought that it was strange that she changed like that. But, if that was because of your brainwashing, then everything makes sense.”

“It doesn’t make sense you know, idiot.”

“Making excuses this late is just unsightly. I’ll make you atone for your sin for sure.”

“I think that idiocy to your level is already a big enough sin, though…”

Kouki screamed and raised his twin holy swords. A torrent of magic power fiercely whirled. The surrounding ground was blown away just from the waves and the ceiling was obliterated. It seemed that he planned to unleash ‘Heaven Might’ using the tremendous magic power.

“There is no way I’m going to wait for you, you know.”

With an exasperated expression, Hajime took out a Bola from ‘Treasure Warehouse’ and threw it to Kouki. Because he was in the middle of charging, Kouki was late in dodging and he got splendidly entangled, he was fixed in place with both his hands bounded immobile in the air.

“Ugh, you coward. But, just this much-“

It seemed that a villain that couldn’t read the mood was a coward. Kouki insulted Hajime while raising his magic power even more in an attempt to escape from Bola. But as long as it wasn’t Nointo then it shouldn’t be possible to escape from it in several seconds, in that time Hajime had finished charging.

Yes, in Hajime’s hand a rifle with a shape that resembled Schlagen was grasped before anyone was aware. What was different from Schlagen was its caliber. Its firing mouth that could be filled with a basket ball smoothly was wide open.

A lump of red magic power shining brilliantly was converged in that large firing mouth.

Magic power cannon ‘Grenzen’——a pure magic power bombardment artifact. From his experience in Merujiine Undersea Ruins, there was also some situation where a pure magic power attack would be useful, so Hajime learned and created this. Although until now, there was no chance to use it, so it was something that was shelved.

The derivative of ‘Magic Power Manipulation’ that was ‘Magic Power Emission’,‘Magic Power Compression’, ‘Remote Control’, also ‘High-Speed Magic Power Recovery’ and its derivative ‘Magic Source Absorption’, all those skills were used as a base and included into the magic power cannon. It focused not just Hajime’s magic power but also the magic power of the outside world, combined with gravity magic so it could compress that magic power. The more the compressed magic power was then the more the amount of magic power of the target would be blown away.

And then right now the amount of the focused magic power was in the amount that would easily surpass ten thousand if it was converted into a status number. No matter how much Kouki had been strengthened outside of the proper track, Kouki was continuously consuming magic power thoroughly with all his might. The result was something that could be easily understood.

“Even if you deny your own words, at the very least you should accept Yaegashi’s words.”

Hajime said that and aimed the focused magic power at Kouki who was opening his eyes wide in panic, and then the trigger was pulled.

“You-, if only you were not here-. I——”

The scream that was filled with Kouki’s hatred resonated. The next moment, a red flash that resembled Schlagen traced a spiral, turning into a bombardment that rushed at Kouki, and his figure was completely swallowed without any spot spared.

Shizuku who was healed by Kaori had opened her eyes, and then Ryuutaro and Suzu gulped audibly. The silent bombardment that didn’t make any roar or destruction dyed the spacious room with a vivid red, and the ice wall was sparkling like a garnet. In a certain meaning, it was a spectacle that could be called fantastical.

Before long the thick flash thinned down, it melted into the air and dispersed. After that, it was as expected there was no trace of destruction at all, and Kouki appeared without any wound. The binding due to the Bola had been released.

karan-! karan-!

The stiff sound resonated. It was the sound of Kouki dropping his two holy swords. At the same time, the black holy sword flickered while disappearing. Looking at it, Kouki’s eye that was reddish-black also returned to normal, his hair also recovered its original color. Reddish-black veins also disappeared from the holy armor. It appeared that he had completely returned to normal.

“My, my strength is vanishing… uu, again, still again… I will take back, everything…”

Hajime’s magic power cannon had blown away the factor of the false image nesting inside Kouki. Matching with his return to his original appearance, the magic power had also stopped welling up from inside. Right now, Kouki could only feel the slight magic power just before it dried up.

Kouki was desperately tying down his consciousness that even now was going to sink into darkness while repeating talk in delirium. And then he was trying to pick up his holy sword even while staggering.

There Hajime who had stored back Grenzen into 'Treasure Warehouse' approached, he grasped Kouki's collar and lifted him up. "Release me!" Kouki yelled angrily, but the clamping hand was too strong that he could only groan.

Seeing Hajime's dangerous look, Ryuutaro thought that Kouki was going to get killed and he was about to jump, but he was stopped by Tio. Tio smiled as though to say that it would be okay.

Hajime lifted up Kouki while he sent his gaze at Kaori and Shizuku who were cuddling close to each other. Kaori and also Shizuku were directing Hajime painful and pleading gazes. Hajime sighed deeply looking at those two and he shrugged his shoulders with an air of 'really it can't be helped'. The expression of the two softened gently.

Hajime who turned at Kouki again threw words with calm but clearly resounding tone while everyone was watching.

"Start over your life from the beginning once more, you stupid, foolish idiot."

Right after, Hajime's right hand, his bare fist, captured Kouki's face. It was merely a clenched straight fist.

GOGA-! Such sound resonated, and like that Kouki was struck into the ground and his consciousness was easily cut off, but the whites of his eyes were barely open.

Kaori and Shizuku rushed close, and the other members too.

Hajime looked at the fainted Kouki while wondering if his "Let's Increase the Meat Shield in Preparation of the Worst Case That There is a lot of Nointo Strategy" was actually cursed. He scratched at his cheek while sighing deeply at how troublesome this was.

Chapter 149 – The Last Age of God Magic

"It seems that everyone survived safely… Then, let's go."

"Wa, wait, wait! If Kouki-kun is not healed…"

Hajime urged everyone to go ahead while unhesitatingly ignoring Kouki who had fainted and was spread-eagled with the white of his eyes exposed. Kaori stopped him while rushing towards Kouki in a panic. It seemed that she wanted a bit of time for healing.

When Kaori examined him, Kouki's body was even more ragged than his appearance suggested. On top of using the derivative of 'Limit Break', the 'Supreme Break', for a long period, Kouki also took in the reddish black magic monster-like power into his body and then further raised his specs forcefully.

As the result, just like Hajime who once ate the flesh and blood of monster and experienced the breakdown of his body, atrocious damage was accumulating throughout Kouki's body. Also because Kouki even took in the rejection of his negative emotion to increase his ability, his mind was also damaged from the mental burden to a degree that one couldn't ignore.

With regeneration magic and her common healing magic, if it was Kaori, then she could immediately heal Kouki's body. Even so, it was a delicate work that couldn't fail, so Kaori wanted a bit of time. Above all, the damage to Kouki's mind couldn't be seen by eyes, it needed to be treated even more carefully. If

the healing failed and Kouki opened his eyes only to became a person who would jovially laugh “HAHAHA-!!” or something else, that would also be troubling.

However, toward Kaori, Hajime made a complaint without even trying to hide his reluctant expression.

“… Spare me from you healing him completely. It’s fine as long as he is not dead, right? Just make him faint for a while.”

“Eh? Why… aa, yes, it’s better like that, I guess?”

For a moment, Kaori tilted her head in doubt, but she immediately guessed Hajime’s thinking and frowned with a troubled look.

“Oi Nagumo, I understand that you cannot stomach Kouki but… you see…”

“Nagumo-kun…”

In contrast, Ryuutaro and Suzu thought that Hajime said that because he didn’t think well of Kouki. However, after they looked at Kouki’s appearance just now, they couldn’t protest strongly. So, as expected, they made a weak and troubled expression.

Shizuku looked sad somehow. Her look was unrelated with Hajime’s unwillingness to aid Kouki’s recovery, but it was directed at Kouki himself. The current appearance of her childhood friend that had been like family since they were still children was just really really sad.

Hajime looked at Ryuutaro and Suzu who while being lost for words still sent him pleading looks for Kouki’s recovery. He then made an expression displaying just how troublesome it was without showing even a bit of hostility and pointed to Kouki while speaking his mind.

“You guys, just think of how troublesome it will be after that over there is healed completely.”

“Troublesome? … ah.”

“Looks like Taniguchi understands, huh? Listen well. Amanogawa couldn’t clear this trial. He averted his eyes from himself and the result was him exploding at me. Even if he woke up now, that still won’t change. And so…”

“It will be just like now again, won’t it…”

“That’s how it is. Well, just now it was also because of his false image’s influence and also his bad habit of convenient interpretation spurring him on, so even if he wakes up, perhaps he won’t rampage right away, but…”

Hajime dropped his eyes on the compass he took from his pocket while continuing.

“The deepest part is just close. Maybe this is the last trial already, but I cannot say for sure that there is anything else ahead. There is nothing more irritating than to be attacked from behind when something happens.”

“… Haa, be grateful that he still has his life, that’s it, huh.”

Even Ryuutaro sighed deeply while nodding “Can’t be helped” at Hajime’s words. And then similar like Shizuku, he sent an earnestly sad gaze at Kouki.

Beside Ryuutaro and Shizuku, Yue directed a gaze as though looking at a trash and whispered to herself.

“… Rather, it’s better to just leave him alone here.”

“No, no, Yue-san. Rather let’s deal the finishing blow.”

“The two of thou… it’s not like I don’t understand the feeling but restrain thyself. The hero is dealt with a nightmare having pinpoint killing intent like that on him, see.”

Shia whispered even more dangerous things in succession and began to tap Doryukken on her shoulder. Her gaze was exactly like a certain person with self-employed profession and arrow attached to the head (TN: Don’t know what reference this is). With an expression that couldn’t say anything, Tio looked at Kouki who was beginning to groan “uu” while trickling cold sweat. Perhaps he was attacked by a neck reaper rabbit and a vampire inside his dream.

It seemed that Yue and Shia were still irritated by being called without honorific and Kouki’s vilification of Hajime.

Hajime was exasperated even while his cheeks loosened happily towards Yue and Shia. And then he approached the side of the two and put his hands on their shoulders to soothe them. Yue and Shia turned to look over their shoulder and guessed that those hands were stopping them. Their expression became a little dissatisfied.

“Hold back just like Tio said. If not, then there is no meaning in me doing something as troublesome as letting him live.”

“Muu… if that’s what Hajime says.”

“You are keeping your life, for now, damn hero.”

As expected, Shia was a little black.

Both of them sent a glance at Kouki who was still having a nightmare and immediately averted their gaze before they hugged Hajime fawningly. Yue was nuzzling her cheek at Hajime’s stomach, and Shia was leaning her cheek on Hajime’s chest silently with her eyes closed pleasantly. Her rabbit ears were flopping *wassa wassa*, and her rabbit tail was happily shaking *furi furi*.

Various things happened with both of them, so their break didn’t work now that they were reunited with Hajime as they completely behaved like a spoiled child. Inside their heads sounded something like “Aa, I’m healed (desuu)”. (TN: The desu refer to Shia. She usually talks politely and has desu attached on her sentence.)

Yue and Shia clung at Hajime rubbingly and pressingly as though they were trying to absorb Hajime factor into their whole body. Looking at them, Hajime guessed “They are acting really spoiled huh, did something happen?” And then with a smile that was dyed with happiness somewhere in it, he patted the back of the two soothingly. The two embraced Hajime happily even further. It was the invocation of super pink space. It was fifty percent more than usual.

Being hit by that pink color, Tio approached unsteadily. She put her finger on her lips longingly and looked at Hajime fixedly. It was a lovely gesture that really tickled a man's heart.

Tio was also an important comrade for Hajime that didn't change. In this labyrinth that was burdening the mind strongly, surely Tio was also exhausted, Hajime sent Tio a kind gaze…

"Annoying. Don't look over here."

"-!? Haa haa, an attack that completely destroys the place's mood… nn… what a discerning master… ahn… but, I feel like crying a little."

A pervert that felt it even when she understood that it was no good. She embraced her own body while her thighs were rubbing at each other fidgetingly. However, it was also her true feeling of wanting to be added to the circle similar to Yue and Shia, so her eyes were a little teary.

Looking at such a Tio, Hajime shrugged his shoulders feeling that it couldn't be helped, his hand beckoned 'here here'. Immediately, Tio went "waai" like a young child and rushed at Hajime's back with a wide smile.

Dropping down and then raising up… Hajime who was able to naturally use the carrot and stick properly was in enough possession of the factor to be a pervert's master. Though the person would surely deny that vehemently.

The pink space that thickened, even more, making Ryuutaro and Suzu avert their gaze as though they were going to puke sugar. But ahead of their gaze was another factor that might increase the sugar content even more while sending glances at Hajime and co. with an impatient look.

"Uu, I got a late start… The healing is… it's fine already with this yep! Hajime-kun!"

"Eh? Wait Kaori! That last thing, it felt like something really irresponsible…"

Kaori who treated Kouki until there was no danger to his life, in the end, went "Ei!" and threw a healing light at Kouki, and then leapt at the pink space of Hajime and co. Kouki who received a healing that was brimming with irresponsibleness twitched. He looked a little pitiful.

Kaori was rushing with a pitter-patter and tried to hug Hajime without stopping, but she received nonchalant obstruction from Yue. A pebble of wind was shot with god speed and aimed at Kaori's forehead. However, Kaori dodged that just with a light shake of her head and embraced the arm of Hajime beside Yue.

Naturally, the sensation of the arm that was hugging Yue disappeared. Yue's smiling face that only looked like it was smiling while not smiling was directed at Kaori. Kaori too returned a smile that seemed to ask "Is there something wrong?". Just like usual, phantom lightning from a dragon and a hannya mask glared at each other from close range.

A low-temperature space was formed together with the pink space, Ryuutaro and Suzu averted their eyes with different meaning this time. Inside such an atmosphere, it was only Shizuku who for the moment confirmed that Kouki's complexion and breathing had returned to normal. His pulse was also beating normally. When she was convinced that there was no danger to his life she sighed in relieve.

"Ryuutaro. Can you carry Kouki?"

“No prob… So, it’s only Kouki who is no good. He is going to be down, huh.”

“That’s… but, it’s also still unclear whether Suzu and you two passed… Besides! As long as we are alive we can take the challenge no matter how many times!”

“That’s true… He did a really stupid thing but, if he is alive I can also wallop him later. Well, if this guy got to go ‘one more time’, then I’ll accompany him till the end. Just like usual.”

“Yep yep!”

The expression of Ryuutaro who carried Kouki clouded while thinking of Kouki. Suzu was also almost caught by that mood, but then she displayed her mood making act and livened up their feelings. Ryuutaro immediately burst into a grin of sympathy too.

Shizuku stared at those two with a smile. Her look was exactly like a mother…

Although, she wasn’t that Shizuku who only kept wracking her brain for her surrounding and concealed her emotion anymore. She had decided to stop that way of living by only acceptance without even realizing it herself.

Therefore, she directed a gaze that was filled with extraordinary heat without hiding it toward Hajime who was crowded and fawned by four beautiful girls and woman. The one who sharply noticed that gaze was Tio. “Oho?” She tilted her head like that while looking at Shizuku observingly. Yue and Kaori were constraining each other while Shia was busy intermediating the two so they still weren’t in the state to notice.

Shizuku put her hand on her chest to affirm the feeling she realized from the trial and her new determination. And then, she clenched her fist tightly as though to grasp something important. From that gesture, Tio guessed what was inside Shizuku’s heart.

“I say… fufu. Do your best, I guess I have to say that here.”

“Aa? What did you say?”

“Oh, master heard that? Fufu, what, that’s only a meager support for a maiden with worrying habit there.”

Hearing the whisper of Tio who was embracing him from behind, Hajime asked back with a doubtful look, and then such answer was returned to him.

For a moment, Hajime frowned wondering what that meant, but Tio was looking at the beyond when he looked over his shoulder, and then he understood when ahead of Tio’s gaze he saw Shizuku who was encouraging herself. After all, Hajime heard that extremely nonchalant confession of Shizuku to him. There was no way he didn’t understand.

“… Oi oi, don’t tell me.”

The cheeks of Shizuku whose eyes met Hajime’s were quickly dyed crimson, the next moment she approached with a determined expression. Suzu and Ryuutaro who shouldered Kouki who had no way to guess what was inside Shizuku’s heart followed her.

And then at the side where Shia was hugging——the spot that faced at Kaori, Shizuku stopped her feet. Her position was excessively close with Hajime. That position almost glued at Hajime's left hand that was holding Shia's waist.

With Shizuku, that close, the members other than Tio also noticed Shizuku's state. "Mu?" They directed her fishy look.

For a moment, Shizuku's eyes met Kaori's. At that moment, Kaori discerned Shizuku's heart because she was her best friend and her eyes opened wide. Although it wasn't because of the feeling that Shizuku harbored, but it was because she was surprised at Shizuku's state that didn't even try to hide it.

During that time, Shizuku's gaze returned to Hajime, and she spun words from her slightly trembling lips.

"Nagumo-kun, thank you for saving Kouki."

"I just punched him out, though?"

"You didn't kill him, right? It's for Kaori and a bit for me. About twenty-percent, isn't it?"

"… Well, something like that."

'Fufu' Shizuku smiled. Looking at the dialogue of the two that connected with each other somehow, Yue mumbled "mumu-", Shia leaked a murmur of "Aa, is it, finally?" in realization. And then Kaori, she didn't really say anything, she was merely sending Shizuku a gentle gaze.

"Really, when you say that you will protect, you will protect even the heart, don't you?"

"There is a line even in my heart. It doesn't mean that I'll do it for everything."

"I know that. But, I, we don't lose our childhood friend in the end. He is really a troubling guy in various things, a big idiot that displayed that kind of disgraceful behavior but… but, even so, he is still like a family."

Toward Shizuku who was showing eyes where sadness and gratitude were entangled, Hajime shrugged his shoulders with an expression that couldn't say anything. If he had to speak honestly, he wanted to just kill Kouki with a snap also for the sake of severing the potential trouble in the future (it was doubtful whether it would happen or not though), but looking at Shizuku right now, also at Kaori's expression, he could think that letting Kouki live was the right thing.

At the very least, compared to having the seed of nightmare of the childhood friend they were raised with killed by the man they were in love with right in front their eyes in this world far away from their homeland, shouldering the trouble that Kouki might bring wasn't anything big, Hajime thought. At the same time, the strength of Shizuku's feeling who could still feel sad even after looking at that figure of Kouki, "As expected from a worldly-wise woman" Hajime couldn't help but holding such a feeling of half admiration and half exasperation.

No, even Ryuutaro and Suzu, it would be a lie if they said that they weren't disillusioned at all, but even so, their feeling of sadness was the biggest feeling. This showed just how much things had piled up between them until now.

If it was the people who didn't have a strong relationship with Kouki—for example, the classmates that even now were in the Heilig Kingdom or the ladies that favored Kouki, there was no doubt they would be easily disillusioned and turned away. In the relationship of these childhood friends, there was a deep bond that was more than a simple word. That was exactly something in the degree that could be said as 'the same like family'.

(If Yaegashi is the mother, then Amanogawa is just like a difficult child huh…)

Without even guessing that Hajime was holding a little impolite impression like that, Shizuku faced Kaori with strong eyes while listening to the sound of her heartbeat that was rapidly heightening from nervousness. There, Kaori returned a really gentle and soft smile as though she had understood everything.

It was as though she was pushing from behind at Shizuku's determination. No, it was undoubtedly a warm cheering yell from a best friend. Shizuku felt her chest tighten strongly while feeling a deep emotion where she wanted to cry out very much, she nodded a little. And then, once more she directed to Hajime a heated gaze that might scald the person that was looked, and she spun her words.

"… It was the first time I relied on someone like that, but it felt really pleasant. Thank you for that too."

"… Even though you threatened me easily."

The redness that dyed Shizuku's cheeks deepened. What she said about relying on wasn't about having Hajime carrying her, she meant about him making her relieved that she could entrust her heart to him. That she could be fast asleep even with thunderous sounds raging was a good proof. And to go as far as calling that 'pleasant', certainly it couldn't be helped that she became red.

The gap with her normally dignified atmosphere was really terrific. Without anyone noticing, even her hand was touching Hajime's left arm gently. The hand wasn't even clutching, it was really just touching, but on the contrary, it was expressing her feeling of wanting to touch Hajime even just for a little.

By the way, Hajime's tsukkomi was ignored like air. A person that couldn't read the atmosphere would become the atmosphere (air).

Shizuku thought that her heart was going to explode from all the gazes that gathered on her, even so, the determination was residing in her eyes, and then, she earnestly conveyed her feeling with those trembling lips.

"Tha, that's why this is my thanks. A, also this is the proof that what I said at that time isn't, a, a joke."

Shizuku faced Hajime who couldn't take any action because he was being embraced by Yue and co, at the same time she stood on her tiptoes. Her heels rose to the limit, the hand that touched at Hajime's arm grasped tightly. And then, Shizuku whose body leaned forward by activating even 'No Beat', those lovely lips that nobody was permitted to touch touched… Hajime's cheek.

The outrageously soft sensation was transmitted on Hajime's cheek. A little vapor and burning heated breath tickled not just Hajime's cheek but even his heart. The contact was just an instant. However, that kiss certainly conveyed Shizuku's boiling heart.

whomp Behind Shizuku a sound of something heavy dropped resounded. Actually, Ryuutaro who was shocked by Shizuku's action unintentionally dropped Kouki's body that made such sound, but there was no way Shizuku had the spare energy to notice that. Rather, no one noticed it.

Shizuku was looking down with all her skin dyed with so much red that it reflexively made one doubt if she was actually going to explode. Hajime had a distant look thinking what was the deal with the sensation remaining on his cheek. Even so thinking that there was no way he could ignore this, so he tried to open his mouth, but before that Shizuku raised her face with strength filling her eyes.

"Yue, Shia, Tio… Kaori. In this trial, I realized many things. About my bad habit, and the emotion that I am feeling right now too. He already, has Yue and others, above all he is the person my best friend loved… I think that I am the lowest. But…"

Shizuku lost her words. There Kaori gave words with expression and tone filled with affection.

"Shizuku-chan… it's fine. You are not the worst or anything. Because it's a matter of heart you know? It's something that cannot be helped at all. Rather than that, Shizuku-chan who will prioritize other people than yourself is now, trying to have your own way, this Shizuku-chan makes me happy."

"Kaori…"

Perhaps she would make Kaori have unpleasant thoughts, by some chance she would make her sad, even though Shizuku knew well that Kaori wasn't someone of that nature but she couldn't help but feel fear, yet hearing Kaori's words which were filled with overflowing kindness without a speck of shadow made Shizuku able to relax his stiffened shoulders.

Looking carefully, although Yue looked displeased, but it didn't appear that she intend to cut in, she then stared at Shizuku while shrugging her shoulders. And then, she slightly showed a daring smile. The same like when with Kaori, she was saying that she would accept the challenge. Shia too was helplessly shrugging her shoulders with one of her eyes closed. Tio looked like she was having fun.

Such Yue and co and Kaori made Shizuku showed a natural smile without any stiffness, with calmness but overflowing determination, she put her feeling into her words and declared.

"I, like Nagumo-kun… That's why I'll do my best for my own sake."

The refreshed smile of Shizuku who said that was something so lovely and pretty that charmed everyone there. Exactly like her name, like a drop of morning dew that was illuminated by the light of rising sun, or possibly, like a drop that overflowed from the berry, that smile was sparkling radiantly with a sweet fragrance. (TN: Shizuku means drop/drip/trickle in Japan)

"Fufu, Shizuku-chan, you are really cute there… Yosh, from now on in order to win against the Yue-Shia pair, let's oppose them with the childhood friends pair! We are going to fight from now on!"

"Ee? Kaori, geez-. But, fufu, indeed perhaps that is better. It's like I and Kaori monopolizing the left and right of Nagumo-kun."

"… Shizuku, I had the premonition that it would be like this one day. I will consign you, together with Kaori to oblivion."

“Yue-san, oblivion is no good. But, if you are talking about monopolizing, then there is no way we will draw back! We accept the challenge, Shizuku-san!”

Yue and co made a noisy ruckus. Hajime who still hugged and couldn’t move still looked far away. It was because there was no sign that they would ask him about his opinion. “Normally, isn’t it the person confessed that replied?” Even while thinking of such question, he couldn’t put a tsukkomi. Because this was something usual. Because he understood it was pointless.

For the girls surrounding Hajime, in the first place other than Yue the assumption was they were rejected, but even so they were determined to get close to Hajime. Speaking clearly, at first Hajime was unable to understand the feeling of such girls including Shia, but when he thought about how he had been made to surrender by Shia like this, he couldn’t say any complaint after this far.

“… Nou, master. How should I react when I am nonchalantly left out like this? They art roused up with the pair confrontation but…”

“Your character is the most eccentric, right.”

The weight on his back increased. Tio was leaning in while whispering sadly. In response Hajime’s reply was careless. Rather than that, Hajime wanted the two sides sandwiching him in between to stop arguing about how much they loved Hajime, that was what he thought from the bottom of his heart. He was busy thinking of how to stop the heated Yue and co.

“… So Shizuku too? Just how this happen that Nagumo. No, really I don’t get it.”

“Hawawa, even Shizushizu has fallen… Nagumo-kun you womanizer! What to do, if even Suzu fall without realizing it then…. together with Onee-sama, do, doing thing like this and that-! … … … …… fumu, that’s not bad.”

“Oi, get back to your sense Suzu. I don’t want to become alone in this strange space.”

Ryuutaro sighed in exasperation at Suzu who was pondering with her hand supporting her chin. And then, he noticed that there was no weight on his back and he picked up Kouki back in panic.

“Haa… Kouki. It’s not like I don’t understand your feeling you know. Certainly, I cannot complain anything even if you got carried away by your fake.”

With complicated expression, Ryuutaro murmured with a small voice even while knowing that it wouldn’t reach the ear of his best friend. When Kouki woke up, what kind of action he would take… imagining that, he hardened his resolve for the worst case to stop Kouki without fail as his best friend so that he wouldn’t make the mistake for the second time.

“… I see. Yue’s memory…”

“… Nn.”

While walking through the new passage that appeared in Kouki’s room, Yue talked about the discrepancy in her memory at Hajime. And then she talked without hiding anything about how perhaps herself was a unique existence more than she thought, and maybe in the future something that her uncle feared would occur.

Yue took Hajime's hand and hugged tightly while looking up at Hajime questioningly. However, she didn't find the serious expression that she expected there. Rather, Hajime was returning an exasperated at Yue, causing her to blink her eyes.

"What to say, that talk is already far too late at this point of time isn't it?"

"… Nn? … By any chance, Hajime noticed?"

"That's, yeah. If Yue's immortality is absolute, then I can be more at peace of mind but… if that's not the case then that's the most important matter that concerns the life and death of my lover, how your automatic regeneration won't activate if you are in an exhausted state. Then, even though there are many ways to cause magic power to be exhausted, why were those bunches could only seal Yue and nothing else? That's just obvious question, right? After all, if I understand the reason then perhaps I can make Yue to absolutely not die."

"… Hajime."

"Even if I say that, based on what we talked when we were at the abyss, it felt like Yue didn't remember about that anyway right? You were in a daze from the sudden betrayal and when you noticed you were already sealed you said."

"… Nn."

"That's why. Rather than dredging up that doubtful point forcefully from your memory to investigate, I thought it's just better if I simply do something about it. Perhaps by any chance, you don't remember it because it's a painful memory. In the end, no matter what kind of existence Yue is, my conclusion won't change… I won't hand over Yue to anyone if it's for that sake then I'll do anything. If someone tries to steal Yue from me, then no matter what kind of existence, no matter what kind of situation, I'll kill them all."

Perhaps imagining a vision of being separated from Yue, Hajime looked straight ahead while his eyes were glaring fiercely toward an unseen enemy. In the end, it was the usual conclusion of "Don't mind about the small thing! If there is any hindrance, then just slaughter them all!" The truth was it was really simple and clear.

Toward such Hajime whose affection and desire to monopolize Yue was exposed out and plain to see, Yue's eyes turned so moist that even now they looked like they would burst. With a gaze filled with so much heat that it seemed to burn, Yue stared at Hajime wholeheartedly, and then… *gabacho!* Yue jumped while hugging at Hajime's neck, her lips were going to devour——but,

"… Shizuku, what is the meaning of this?"

A black sheath was thrust before her eyes. It was pushed out between Hajime and Yue, obstructing Yue's kiss. Yue traced the source of the pushed out black katana and stared reproachfully and asked at the source Shizuku.

Shizuku's gaze was wandering around restlessly, it seemed that rather than obstructing intentionally she did that reflexively.

“E, err… you see, we still haven’t even confirmed that the trial of the great labyrinth is over yet, right? That’s why, I wonder if doing something like that is better to be put on hold for later, something like that?”

“… And the truth?”

“It’s envi… not that. I as well… not that. Let’s pay attention to TPO, that’s what I mean. Yep.” (TN: TPO=Time, Place, Order (?))

Shizuku whose gaze was swimming around lied with a really unconvincing lie. Kaori beside her was “To stop Yue’s attack… as expected from my Shizuku-chan!” she was giving Shizuku extremely high praise.

“Even though you say that, but it feels like someone kissed me normally just before, though?”

Hajime looked back over his shoulder while talking to Shizuku teasingly. Immediately, Shizuku’s cheeks blushed with vivid red autumn. “Uu. That’s, because, something that only I haven’t done is… lonely.” She leaked out such whisper that sounded like an excuse. There Tio continued the talk with further teasing.

“Although, it was only a ‘chuu’ at the cheek. If thou art swordsman, then how about gallantly cutting in? The lips of master won’t be stolen without some forcefulness thou know?”

“Ste, stealing or anything… that’s improper. Something like that, I think it has to be in a proper situation, it should be done with the mutual consent of both parties. That, if possible, if Nagumo-kun is the one that does it by his initiative… I’ll feel happy.”

Reddened cheek, somewhat bowed head and the bashfully talking Shizuku. On her bosom was the black katana that she had already drawn back—the present from Hajime, she hugged it tightly as though it was the expression of Shizuku’s emotion of wanting to do something like that to the person himself.

And then Shizuku’s walking position was three step diagonally behind Hajime as though it had been already measured. Her gracefully following figure was just like a Yamato Nadeshiko (TN: Graceful in Japan could be spelled as shizushizu). With a momentary flash, the second part of Hajime’s present to her that was the hair ornament was shining at the base of her trademark ponytail.

“…”

With continuing silence, Hajime was directing a staring gaze at Shizuku as though he was looking at a rare animal.

Basically, the female camp that was surrounding Hajime was a carnivore with an assertive aspect. They are girls that wanted with all their might for Hajime to accept them. Therefore, hearing the word ‘improper’ just from one kiss made Hajime show his surprise with his eyes widened reflexively. “Eh? A girl like this, really exists?” He was thinking like that inside his heart, it could be said that he was already considerable dyed by the color of Yue and co.

Looking at that state of Hajime, Yue murmured. Even though it seemed to be a whisper, but her voice was transmitted enough to Shia and Kaori and the others too.

“… What girl power. Yaegashi, is she a monster?”

It seemed that Shizuku's girl power that Yue witnessed was really a cheat. For some reason, Kaori was looking at Yue with the tremendous triumphant look. And then, Shizuku who was showing a tremendous gap of atmosphere with her unease of getting showered by attention from surrounding compared to her usual dignified air was suddenly pushed out forcefully by Kaori as though to show her off.

Yue groaned "muh", and then she pushed out Shia beside her. "He? Wha, what is it?" Yue flapped the rabbit ears of the troubled Shia using wind to further appeal at the appeal point even more while directing a fearless grin at Kaori.

It appeared that they were doing partner showdown. "My best friend is absolutely cute!" Such wordless confrontation was being unfolded right now.

Such usual Yue and Kaori made Shia remonstrates them while showing a troubled smile. She tried to remonstrate them, but a vein appeared on her forehead seeing the two continuing to exchange sparking stare, she cut in between two while tapping Doryukken on her shoulder. A wordless pressure was spreading.

Yue and Kaori drew back with a stiff smile. Shizuku was directing a respecting gaze at Shia. Truly, since they came into this great labyrinth, Shia's growth was striking.

Hajime was looking at the state of Shia and co, he then changed the talk while making an admiring expression.

"… Nevertheless, you reached a draw with Yue who fought seriously. You also rebuked Yue strongly, I've got to prepare a present for Shia like this."

"Fue? I, is it fine?"

Hajime smiled believing that Shia was the MVP for this time with how she scolded Yue's nonsense and made Yue revoked it with her strength. Shia who was praised suddenly looked happy even while getting flustered.

"… Shia's slap. It was the first time for me who had never been hit even by my parents. I cannot forget the pain running through my cheek. Wish to your heart's content."

"… Yue-san, you are lightly holding a grudge, aren't you? Well, it's not like I have some special wish or anything. Everything has already been granted already. It's fine if Hajime-san gives me a handmade present. The matter with Yue-san was something that I did because I wanted to do it."

If it was in the past, Shia would yell things like "Date!" or "Take my first time!", but now she didn't really get high-spirited overly, rather she was smiling happily while leaving the choice to Hajime.

"… What composure… so Shia has already turned into a formidable enemy that rivaled Yue. It was careless of me of all people."

"E, err, Kaori? For some reason, your face looks like a character of a dramatic story you know?"

"Shizuku-chan, so that we can obtain that composure, I think it's no good if we are contenting ourselves with our position as a challenger."

"Err…"

The composed attitude of Shia made Kaori feel impatience. Her appearance with her arms crossed and one hand supporting her chin pondering was like a certain scholar searching for the truth somewhere. Naturally, Shizuku was bewildered by her best friend's eccentricity.

Looking at such a Shizuku, Kaori opened her eyes wide *kah!* and declared.

"Yes, we are not the challenger but we should be the attacker!"

"… Kaori. You are getting tired you know? Let's calm down a little."

"Shizuku-chan, when the conquer of the great labyrinth is over, let's attack Hajime-kun when he is asleep with the two of us."

"Really, just what are you saying!?"

"It's fine. With the trial this time, I have grasped almost all the function of this body, so I think if it's with the two of us we will manage it somehow."

"The thing that has to be done at all cost is about the way Kaori's head work. I beg you to please come back to your senses…"

"I, it will be the first time for both of us but… let's have it plundered together okay, Shizuku-chan!"

"… I wonder if I should hit you flying just like what Shia did."

Toward Kaori who was making clenched fists with both her hands while speaking her resolve with rough breathing "Funsu!" and red cheeks, Shizuku began to seriously considered whether she should slap her with a tired expression. It appeared that her worrying habit still didn't change even with the various things she had become unbounded from.

"… Stop with the love comedy, we are proceeding forward."

"Feeling this tired after we linked up, just what's with that."

Suzu and Ryuutaro's voice that sounded even more tired than Shizuku resounded in the passage, but it seemed that it didn't enter anyone's ear. This was after they had finished a serious trial of facing themselves, so perhaps it caused them to lose the restraint of their heart in various things.

With that kind of feeling, they advanced forward with light atmosphere even while putting their guard up for ten minutes.

The party finally arrived at the end of the road. On the ice wall of the end of the road, there was a magic circle carved there in the shape of heptagon where its tops were arranged with the crest of each great labyrinths. When Hajime and others approached, it began to shine faintly. And then the whole wall was covered with something like a membrane of light. It was a phenomenon that really resembled the entrance of the great labyrinth.

When Hajime touched it lightly with his fingertips, a ripple spread as though a stone was thrown into water surface. As expected, it seemed that it was a teleport gate.

Hajime turned behind and ran his gaze at all members, then he nodded. Yue and others nodded in response.

And then Hajime and others lept into the light membrane all at once.

…

…

…

“… It seems this time we aren’t separated, huh.”

“… Nn. Also that.”

“Hmm, it appears that we hath finally arrived.”

“What a pretty sanctuary.”

When the light that dyed their sight cleared up, there was a wide space there.

That beautiful quadrangle space that was supported by several thick ice pillars was made from ice just as expected. It wasn’t ice with high reflection rate that could be mistaken as mirror like all the ice walls until now, but ice wall that was made from pure ice that was really transparent.

And then what attracted their attention the most was the ground. It was overflowing with water that they had never seen at all since they came here. It appeared the temperature of this space wasn’t that low. It seemed that a lot of spring water was flowing in, small fountains were put here and there on the spacious lake surface. Most likely there was also the hole where the water was flowing out.

And then on such a lake surface there was the floating floor in the shape of stepping stone that was made from ice. At the other side, ahead of that floor, there was a huge ice sanctuary. It was just right opposite the side where Hajime and others came out from. The foothold of floating ice was continuing until there on the quadrangle lake surface.

Because the water didn’t freeze, Hajime experimented by taking off his cold protection artifact. The result was as expected, it was a cold space but it only felt cool and not freezing. Just as Tio said, there was no doubt that this place was the deepest part of the [Ice and Snow Cavern]. Even for a ‘liberator’, surely, they would beg off to have a residence with extreme cold.

“… We… conquered it… hic- “

“Suzu-chan… you did it.”

Suzu was overcome by emotion and became teary eyed while looking at the sanctuary. In various meaning, she reached this achievement just barely. She failed, broke, but even so, she gritted her teeth and endured, and finally she reached the goal. It was natural for her to be moved. Kaori was gently putting her hand on Suzu’s shoulder while also crying in sympathy.

That deep emotion was also similarly felt by Ryuutaro. “Heh,” He chuckled while something shining was gathering a little in his eyes.

“… We did it.”

“Yeah. I don’t know how many times I almost died though.”

“That’s because every time you didn’t think of the consequences and just charged.”

“Nooo, haha, well, the result is alright so ain’t that fine.”

When Shizuku slapped lightly at Ryuutaro’s arm, contrary to his words Ryuutaro averted his eyes awkwardly.

With Hajime at the head, they used the ice foothold and advanced to the sanctuary. They managed to cross to the opposite shore without anything especially happened. A magic circle was drawn at a deep pool of the opposite shore. Nothing happened when they stepped on it, so thinking about it based on the position, perhaps it was a magic circle for a shortcut.

The entrance of the sanctuary was a large double door, there a crest that resembled snow crystal was drawn. It was the crest of the liberator ‘Vandol Shune’. There was no sign of something like a seal or anything, when Hajime put his strength and pushed, it opened without resistance.

“Even though the appearance is a sanctuary, the inside is like a house, huh.”

“… Nn. It’s like Oscar’s hideout.”

Ahead of the opened door, there was nothing at all like stained glass or altar like in church. In exchange, there was an entrance of the mansion with a chandelier made from ice hanging above. There was a corridor that continued inside and a stair that went to the second floor from two sides.

Hajime used the compass and searched for the magic circle’s location. According to the compass, it seemed that it was at the inner part of the straight passage on the first floor. Everyone advanced to the inside following Hajime’s lead. On the way, there were several rooms, so they tried to open the door, inside there was just normal furniture put there. The ice wall too when they tried to touch it only felt cool and not cold. Just like Hajime’s cold protection artifact, surely there was some kind of cold protection measure applied to it.

Like that, they advanced while admiring the inside of the mansion, and finally, they found a thick door.

“It’s here.”

Hajime whispered that and opened the door without hesitation. Inside there was indeed the magic circle that was their aim.

Everyone quickly entered into that magic circle. Just like usual, the inside of their brain was scrutinized and in the head of the people whose labyrinth capture was recognized, the age of the god’s magic was engraved immediately.

The last of that——by acquiring the [Metamorphosis Magic], Shia and others looked at each other’s face with their happiness plain to see, at that time,

“Guu!? GaAAh!!”

“… -, UuUUUUH!!”

Screams filled with anguish resounded. Shia and others were startled and moved their gaze in that direction. Over there were the figures of Hajime and Yue on their knee while holding their head as though they were enduring fierce headache.

“Hajime-san!? Yue-san!?”

“What’s the matter, both of you!!”

Shia and Shizuku raised shocked voices.

“Calm down! Kaori! Don’t be befuddled!”

“Eh? Ah, yes, I’ll examine them immediately!”

Tio’s thunderous roar fell on the members that were all shook up from the sudden happening. The healing expert Kaori was also scolded before she returned to her senses.

And then when she was about to examine in hurry, right after that,

“-a…”

“… nh.”

Hajime and Yue that were sweating a lot seemed to be released from the unknown pain, strength left their body and they slumped down, they fainted just like that. Shia and Shizuku immediately supported them. Looking for their state, it appeared that the two of them fainted together.

A burden to the degree that caused the two who had surpassed cheat character and reached bug level to faint… just what in the world happened. Silence returned to the room and a dumbfounded atmosphere was flowing.

“For the time being, we have to rest the two of them…”

The words of Tio (pervert), who became reliable with admirable calmness in this kind of time, made the confused members look at each other’s faces.